Cut My Cote

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ROM

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There is a proverb in John Heywood's *Proverbs in the English Tongue*, published in 1546, which is still familiar: "I shall cut my cote after my cloth." Its inclusion in that early gathering shows that even at that date it was old. We now take it as an admonition to live within our means; with sumptuary laws such as "No man under the degree of a knight . . . may use more than 3 yards of cloth for a long gown" still in force, in Heywood's time it would have meant the same.

Yet there is another, more far-reaching meaning. The simple traditional garments of many cultures, changing infinitely slowly over long periods of time, have both consistency and incredible variety. What are the influences that govern their shapes and forms?

The body with its need for movement is a variable constant in the development of clothing. Climate has less influence on the cut and shape than might be expected, for some bundle up against the heat as much as others do against the cold. The terrain in which clothing is worn certainly influences its shape, for the movements necessary for life on a mountain-side are quite different from those of a person who spends most of his life on horseback on a plain. High social status, with its accompanying wealth and leisure, is reflected more in trimming and elaboration than in basic cut. The Pharaoh wore very fine and beautifully pleated linen but his garments were not basically different from the simple wrap-around skirts of his artisans and workmen. Attitudes towards the covering of the body have always had a considerable effect on the making of clothes. If a hampering garment could be casually dropped off while performing a task, it meant that it did not need to fit as well, or be fastened in place as securely, as in those parts of the world where the body was expected to be covered at all times. These factors are all important, but the material from which a garment is made is the factor that has the most influence on the particular shaping of it.

Basically, two separate developments eventually merge into one: cuts based on the shape of animal skins, and those dependent on the rectilinear form of loom-woven cloth. Throughout the circumpolar regions garments are now frequently made of cloth, but their cut reflects the fact that in ages past they were made of skins.

Simple fabrics can be very similar in appearance regardless of period or area of origin, but man, with his infinitely varied cultures, has devised many shapes and sizes of looms with very varied capacities. These fit the cultures from which they come, some being for those accustomed to work standing, others where a squatting position was customary, and still others for various sitting positions either on the floor or raised above it. If, as in the ancient

Mediterranean world, the loom was wide and capable of making a fair length of material, the resulting garments were wide and draped, whereas in the east the looms were narrow and the garments were seamed and comparatively tight. This is reducing the vast and rather nebulous problem of interpreting patterns of dress to the most simple terms, but the indigenous clothes of many parts of the world bear out this rather sweeping thought.

With today's ease of manufacture we take textiles for granted and the wasting of cloth does not worry us. But for those closer to the processes of production the attitude changes, and an extreme economy of material was practised in the cutting of traditional garments. This does not necessarily mean that very little material was used. Extra and unnecessary length could be employed for purposes of opulence, but full benefit was obtained from it and nothing was left over.

In ancient times, weaving far outstripped the techniques of cutting and sewing, with the result that garments were made with the cut edges as straight as possible and with selvages cleverly utilized to save the sewing of hems and to give strength where needed. Garments were cut neatly with little wastage from widths produced on the customary loom of the area. Smaller pieces, particularly underarm gussets, were often cut from finer and sometimes older material.

If there is a strong tradition of cutting a garment in a certain way due to the customary local width of cloth, that method will hold firm long after the introduction of materials of a different width from a more advanced loom. In the same way, if it is an area where, in ancient times, skin was the basic clothing material, the cuts of the cloth garments will often only make sense if it is borne in mind that the maker is subconsciously trained to work in a non-cloth tradition.

Few really old garments have survived, but the combination of those in the ROM with others published or available for research elsewhere, along with the almost limitless supply of pictorial and written records and our own large and very varied collection of comparatively modern traditional garments, presents material ample enough to provide many researchers with a profitable lifetime of work. It is tantalizing that it is generally impossible to do more than touch the surface, and wonder what is under it.

The cuts of many garments in the Royal Ontario Museum collections have been worked out and the pieces re-arranged to see how they came from the original width of material. It has been a fascinating study opening up all sorts of possibilities for research. This small publication is only an introduction in the most general terms to the idea, since volumes of writing and many illustrations would be required to give any continuity to a subject which embraces the history of clothing throughout the whole world. Scattered examples will illustrate specific points that seem important to the author.

Detail from Pl. 4.

Garments from Loom Lengths Without Sewing

The simplest garments are those with no cutting or sewing at all. These include all sizes of loom pieces which may be folded around, draped on, or tied to the human body: shawls, mantles, wrap-around dresses and skirts, loin cloths, aprons, smaller pieces used over the head or around the neck or legs, and long narrow lengths that with skill could be transformed into the most intricate head-gear.

The earliest garment in the ROM is a finely woven plain length of linen from Egypt that dates from around 2000 B.C. (ROM 906.18.41). It is 335 cm (11′) long and 112 cm (44″) wide, and would have been woven on the simplest of looms with the warp threads attached to a pair of bars pegged out on the ground. Ancient representations show looms according with the length and width of this piece, as well as people wearing such large wraps, frequently finely pleated.

A garment of similar proportions is still a familiar sight today: the Indian sari. In earlier days, these were woven on a loom not unlike the ancient Egyptian one with the warp stretched out across the ground, but with the refinement of having a pit dug under it so that foot treadles could be used and so that the weaver did not have to crouch at his work. The sari is put on in a variety of special ways either to form a complete dress or over another garment (Pl.1, ROM 965.195), making a very beautiful and wearable costume well suited to the climate of its origin.

The first loom of which we have any knowledge in the Greek world, and in adjacent parts of Europe and Asia, was different from the Egyptian loom and usually much wider. It had a simple, almost vertical frame from which the warp threads hung and were attached in groups to weights. The weaver stood and worked down from the top of the loom. This is known as the warp-weighted loom and is important because its capacity for wide widths and considerable lengths affected the form of Greek and Roman costume. Moreover, this loom eventually spread north to exert its influence on the development of costume in the whole of Europe.

The garments which can be studied in Greek vase paintings and Greek and Roman sculpture—cloaks, wraps, mantles, dresses and tunics—are all dependent on large wide pieces of material. These were truly cloth cultures, with no evidence of the skin garments that came before and which were still a recognizable influence on the garments of earlier Mediterranean cultures. The Greek tunic or dress (*chiton*) worn in different lengths by men and women was simply a very large loom piece used sideways, sometimes with excess width folded over to form a flap at the upper edge. It was fastened at the shoulders, usually by pinning, and could be worn with the open edge loose down one side of the body or caught into place; girded around the waist and breast the whole garment fell in graceful folds. This type of dress continued through Roman times, along with simpler tunic forms and many types of straight cloak, but the best known piece of Roman clothing, the toga, the mark of the Roman citizen, was somewhat more specialized. Although it was also a straight piece of woollen material, the lower corners were cut off to make the draping of it easier.

Material from the warp-weighted loom is characterized by having three finished edges, the starting border and two selvages. These are always used in such a way as to make sewing a hem unnecessary.

In a northern European area influenced by the warp-weighted loom, another garment made from a single large length of cloth survived in use for a very long time: the great belted plaid of Scotland. Developing at the end of the sixteenth century, this was the main garment, and might be the only one, of the poorer people in the Scottish Highlands. It consisted of a four- to six-yard (3.5-5.5 mm) length of woollen cloth about two yards wide (183 cm), and was put on in a curious manner. It was laid out on the ground, and gathered in folds so that it would fit the girth of the wearer with a plain section left at each side. The man lay down on it with one selvage at about knee level, and fastened the whole thing with a belt. When he stood up, the lower part was like a kilt, and the upper part could be draped around the body. If the weather was bad, the upper part could be pulled up over the shoulders or, in the case of women who wore it longer than the men, right over the head. Travellers often recorded their surprise that the poor people of the Highlands wore little but a bit of their bedding. If it could be afforded, a linen shirt was also worn, and richer men often wore tight trousers as well, particularly when riding.

Sometime about the end of the 17th century, the great plaid became two garments. One was used as the familiar kilt, and when this developed the pleats were permanently stitched into place rather than gathered each time the garment was put on. The kilt was still worn in a wrap-around manner with two plain sections lapping each other in front. The upper half of the great plaid was retained and used as it had been, draped around the shoulders. There is a story that it was an Englishman who thought up this change in the interests of efficiency,

Plate 1. Wedding sari. Indian, Gujerat. 19th century. Dull red cotton with gold filé and tie-dyed patterns. ROM 965.195

and this rankles the Scottish writers on costume. It seems more likely that it came as the natural result of a change in the basic loom of the countryside.

We know that further south the horizontal loom with its narrower width came into western Europe sometime about 1000 A.D. It revolutionized weaving, particularly large-scale professional weaving, and costume departed from the classical concept. We also know that the spread of the new loom north was slow, and particularly so in remote country areas. The warp-weighted loom was still the basic one in the Faroes and Iceland at the end of the 18th century. The northern part of Scotland may well have retained this old tool into the 18th century, and as long as the material was coming from the old loom it could be produced in a wide width. Once the narrow loom came in, it would be a very easy step to make the covering for the body in two pieces rather than take the trouble to sew two lengths together to make a great unwieldy garment.

The kilt or pleated wrap-around skirt, although so strongly associated with Scotland, is a common form throughout the world. A piece of cloth taken and wrapped around the waist is one of the most basic forms of clothing occurring in many sizes in many places. It could be the sole garment but is often used over another body covering. Often a plain wrap-around skirt does not provide room for easy movement of the legs, and so we find various ways of putting fullness into it. Pleating is a very ancient idea. The material simply was folded while damp and clamped into place until it dried (Pl. 2, ROM 959.83).

The use of the shoulder plaid survived generally, rather than just regionally, for men's costume in the great long shawls often used instead of overcoats throughout the 19th century. With the introduction of Kashmir shawls from the east at the end of the 18th century as an exotic luxury, shawls for women became an article of high fashion as well as utility, and many were quite as capacious as the "great plaid".

Plate 2. Woman's festive costume. Yugoslavian, Croatia. About 1900. Finely pleated linen with lace weave patterns.
Gift of Mrs. Edgar J. Stone. ROM 959.83

The Beginning of Sewn Garments

The poncho is an initial stage in the development of upper body garments. These occur in many parts of the world, but are best known in South and Central America. The simplest form is a piece of cloth with a hole in the centre for the head (Pl. 3, ROM 946.96), the next where it is folded in half and sewn down the lower part of the sides to make a regular sleeveless shirt. Weaving was done on very simple looms, with the warp threads stretched between one rod which was hung up and another attached to the weaver's waist. The width was fairly flexible, although usually limited to the reach of one weaver and frequently even narrower. The finished cloth could be wound on the rod close to the weaver, but there was no provision made at the other end for a roll for extra length. The warp was limited to what could be conveniently hung up between the weaver and the wall. Ponchos were made from short lengths specially set up for that particular garment, and often from two or sometimes three lengths woven separately and sewn together. Materials from Central and South American looms have what appear to be four selvages. There is a closed starting edge, and the warp threads also turn at the finishing edge. With painstaking hand work, the weaving is completed by forcing in the last weft threads to produce a piece of cloth finished on

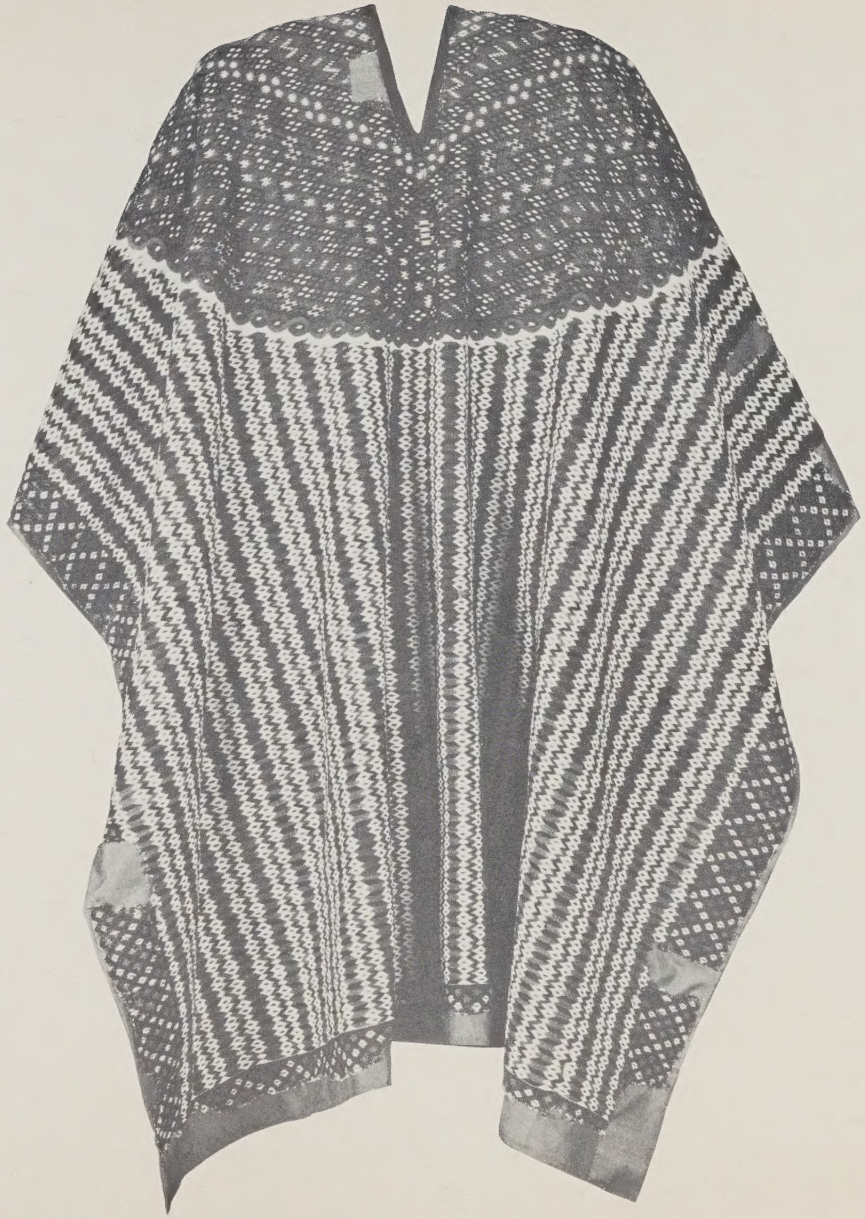
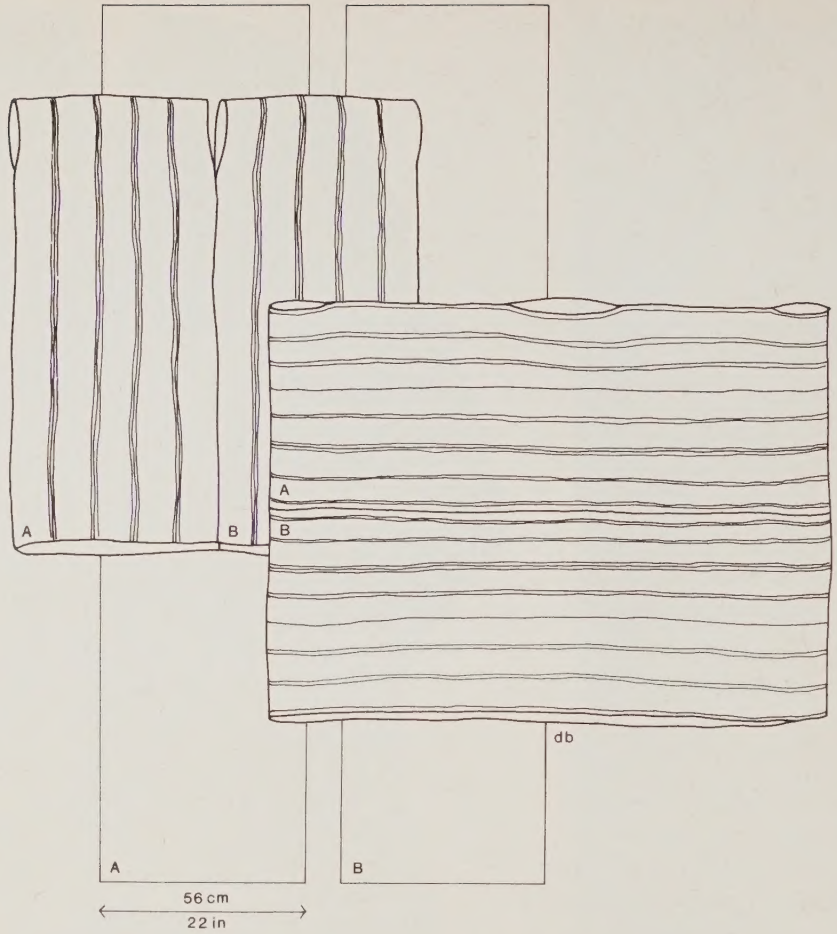


Plate 3. Poncho. Mexican, Oaxaca. 19th century. Very finely woven wool tapestry in blue, brown and white.
Gift of Mrs. M. Heartwell. ROM 946.96

four sides. Here we are not dealing with cutting the coat to fit with the cloth, but rather with weaving the cloth in the specific sizes required for the garment.

Two garments made about the middle of this century by Campa Indians in the Apurimac region of Peru (Diag. 1, ROM 951.116.11 and 950.70.6) are an interesting study in cut differentiation between the sexes. Both are made of two lengths of striped hand-woven cotton. The man's is quite capacious and made in the normal way. But since, according to the ethnologist who collected the material, it was important that the women should be differentiated, the stripes on the woman's garment run in the opposite direction with the seam horizontally around the body.

Sometimes the ancient Peruvians took the poncho the next step in its development into a proper shirt and added sleeves. A part poncho in the ROM (919.8.6) shows that to make this garment the loom was set up four separate times with two pieces for the body and two smaller complete pieces for the sleeves. It seems complicated, but the workman's time was of little importance and the elite could have whatever they wanted.



1. Ponchos. Peruvian, Campa Indian, Apurimac region. Mid-20th century. Cotton striped in brown and natural white.
Gift of S. Dirks ROM, 951.116.11. 950.70.6

The Development of the Shirt

The body-covering garment with neck opening, side seams and sleeves has had many names: shirt, shift, tunic, robe, dress, frock, smock, chemise. Some of these terms have had more specific meanings at certain periods and in certain areas, but whatever the name, the garment has been a basic one for both men and women in many parts of the world since very early times. A study of the development of its cut bears out the importance of loom widths in the shaping of garments.

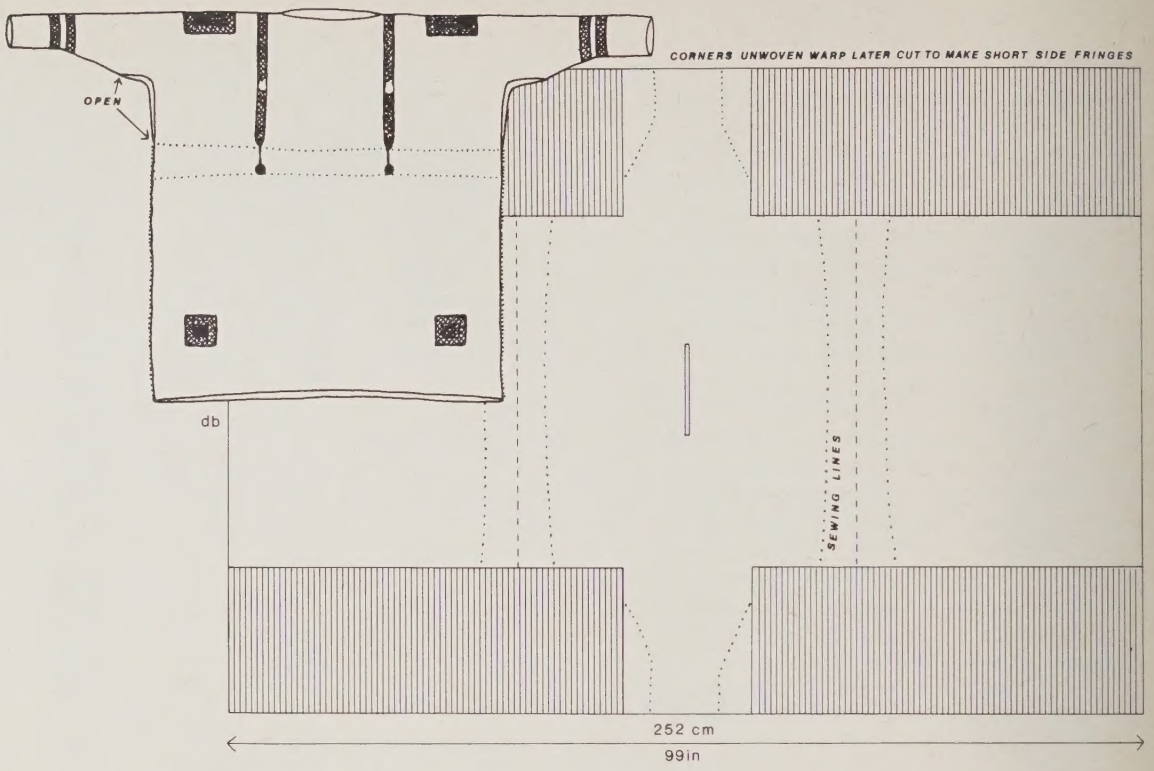
With a very wide loom, it was possible to weave cloth in one piece to the desired shape with neck opening woven in and sleeves woven on. It was a primitive idea, but it occurs and is quite practical. In the ROM there is a remarkable collection of textiles from Egypt, including a number of shirts dating from the 4th to 12th centuries A.D. The earlier ones are usually designated Coptic as they come from an area of Coptic Christian population (Pl. 4, ROM 910.1.11), and among them are examples of shirts woven to shape.

It is not known just when the warp-weighted loom ceased to be the main loom of the Roman

Plate 4. Man's shirt. Egyptian, Coptic. 4th century A.D. Linen with tapestry woven decoration in purple wool.
The Walter Massey Collection. ROM 910.1.11

world. It was probably already superseded by the time of Christ, and Coptic garments in the ROM were woven on a vertical loom with a solid frame which could also be very wide. A seamless robe could be woven as shown in Diagram 2 (ROM 910.1.2). The warp was sufficiently wide to make double the length of the garment. Starting at the bottom, the weaver wove only sufficient width for a sleeve; when it was long enough the weaving was carried right across the width from one side to the other, and a split left in the centre for the head. Then the other shoulder was woven, and the garment completed by weaving another narrow piece for the other sleeve. By folding this single piece across the centre, and turning it on its side so that the warp ran horizontally, the garment could be made with very little sewing.

In the limited group of tunics that have survived, a number have a large tuck around the waist which cannot be for a drawcord as the ends are not open. As the width of the loom controlled the length of the garment, it seems likely that sufficient width was allowed; if the customer was short, the length was adjusted by one of these rather unsightly tucks that would then be covered by a girdle. Sometimes the tucks slanted slightly between centre and sides (Diag. 2) and would have helped to make the bottom of the garment hang evenly when belted.

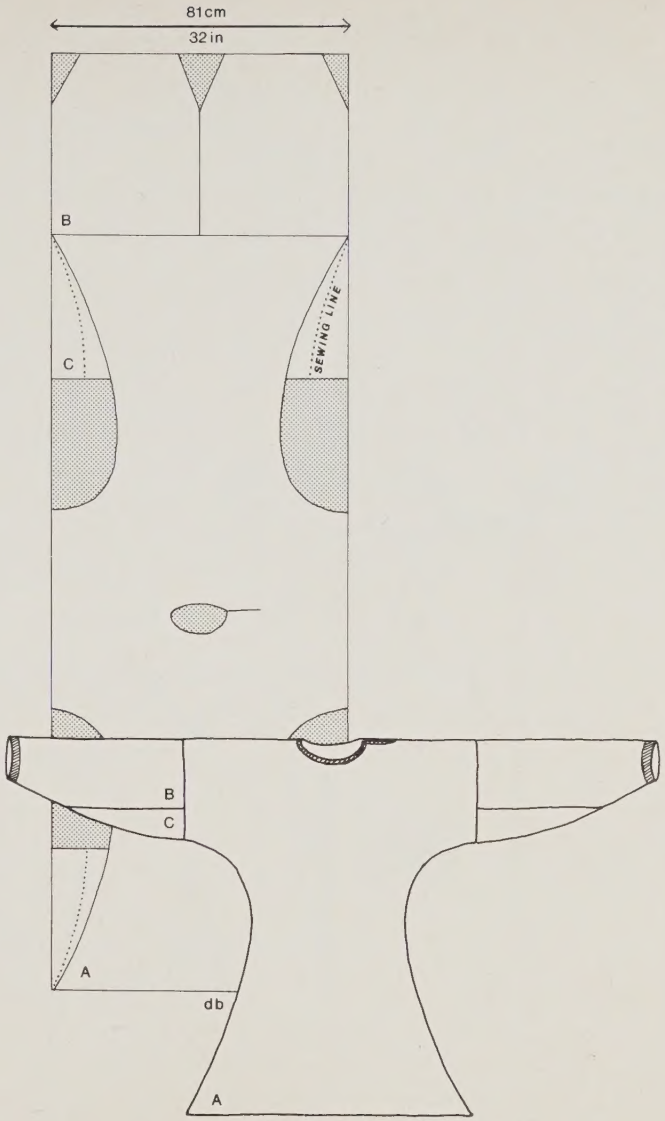


2. Man's shirt. Egyptian, Coptic. 5th-6th century A.D.
Linen with tapestry woven decoration in purple wool.
The Walter Massey Collection ROM 910.1.2

There are two Coptic shirts in the ROM with almost identical measurements. One (ROM 910.1.2) is woven as described in a single width with a tuck around the centre of the body. The other (ROM 910.1.5) at first sight appears to be the same, but on close examination the sewing turns out to be a seam, not a tuck, and the garment has been made from three equal widths (81cm; 32″) of material. Still another loom, much narrower and horizontal, was coming into the area from farther east, and was undoubtedly used for the weaving of this shirt. This is an excellent example of a garment holding its traditional shape for some time after the change of loom width made another shape more reasonable.

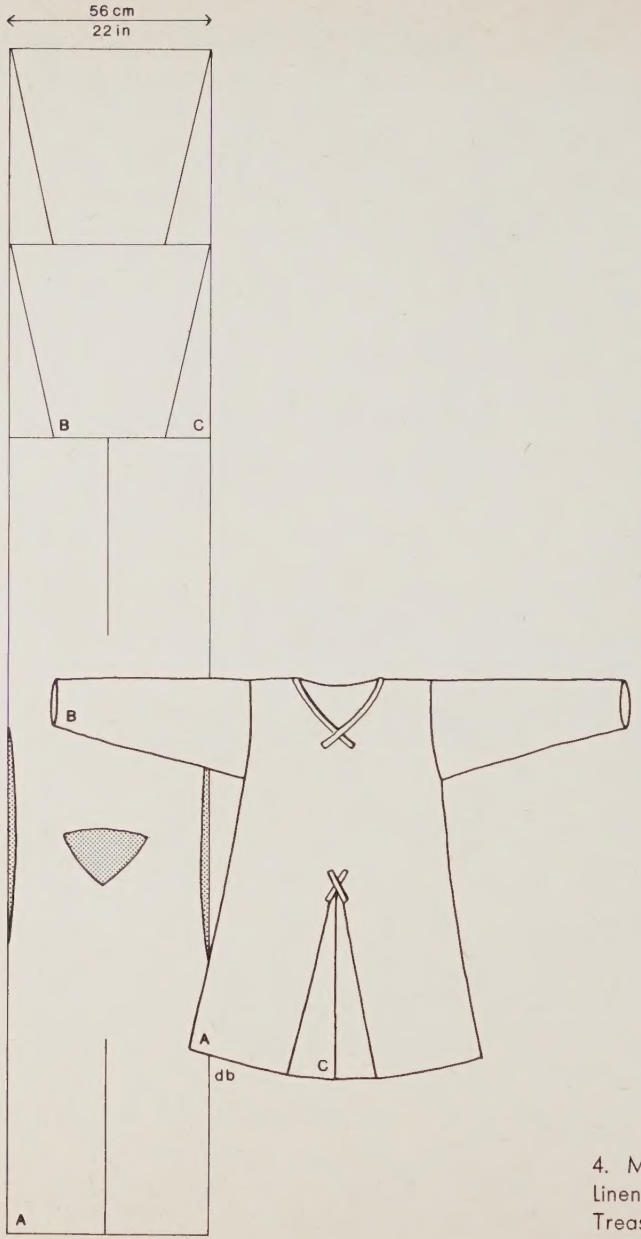
A fine linen shirt bound with silk (Diag. 3, ROM 910.1.9) is from the same area but considerably later in date, probably the 10th-12th centuries, well after the Moslem conquests had changed so many design and technological concepts. It is also woven on a horizontal loom, and utilizes the same width of material (81 cm; 32″) as the pieced Coptic shirt, but here the cut is designed to fit the loom width. The body comes from one length folded, and is shaped by cutting out a section under each arm, and slanting from there to the hem. Each sleeve is made from a half-width with the addition at the underarm of part of the piece cut from either side of the body.

This Islamic shirt appears to be very close in cut to those of mediaeval Europe. Sometimes men appear to be wearing short loose pants, but it is



3. Man's shirt. Egyptian, Islamic. 10th - 12th century. Linen bound at neck and wrists with silk. The Walter Massey Collection ROM 910.1.9

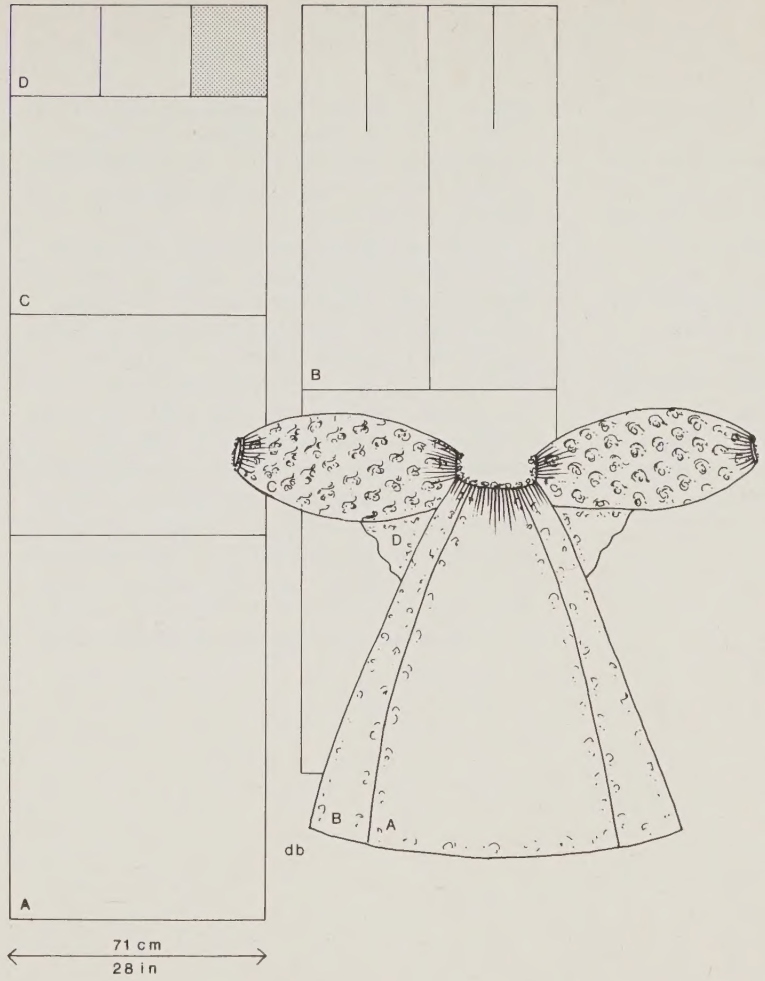
more likely that it is a shirt of this sort that has been split fore and aft to give more leg room. A later development was to fill the front and back slits with gores. One actual such garment that is said to date from the thirteenth century, and very likely does, is the linen tunic of St. Louis in the Treasury of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. It was not possible to make a proper examination, but the cut works out as shown from linen about 56 cm (22″) wide (Diag. 4). The material cut from the shaping of the sleeves is just enough to provide two narrow segments for insertion in both back and front slits.



4. Man's shirt. Probably French. 13th century. Linen. Said to have belonged to St. Louis. Treasury of Notre Dame Cathedral, Paris

By the time we have any significant body of material from western Europe available for examination, the outer garments had been so affected by fashion that they are of little use to this study. But fortunately the underclothes retain many of the features of earlier traditional cuts. In pictures of the 16th century, workmen are shown wearing plain shirts as a main garment while the wealthy are dressed in stiff fashionably shaped clothes. However, under these stylish clothes we can glimpse the survival of what used to be the main garment, now the undergarment.

One of these early shirts (Victoria and Albert Museum, T. 770.191) is thought to be Italian, 17th century and for a woman. It is as simple and archaic as it can be despite exquisite embroidery (Diag. 5). Front and back are made from separate pieces with, for opulence, the addition of a half width at each side. Splits from the top allow the insertion of sleeves, each a full loom width. Below the sleeve a square gusset has been let in. This device is the most basic and widespread way of giving full movement to the arm. The shaping of

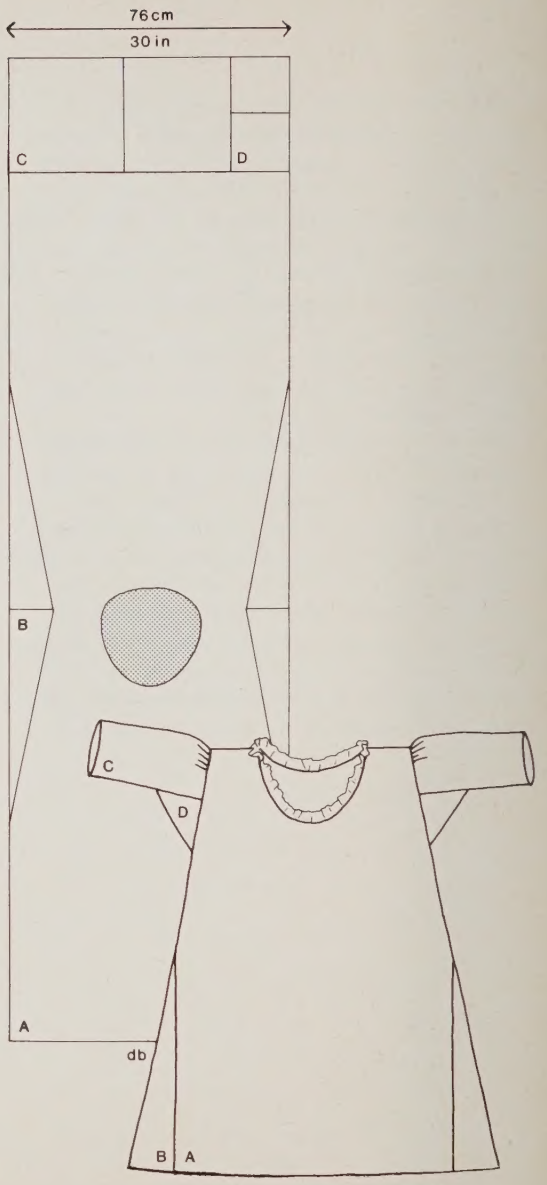


5. Woman's shirt. Probably Italian. 17th century.
Linen with polychrome silk embroidery.
Victoria and Albert Museum, London. T.770.191

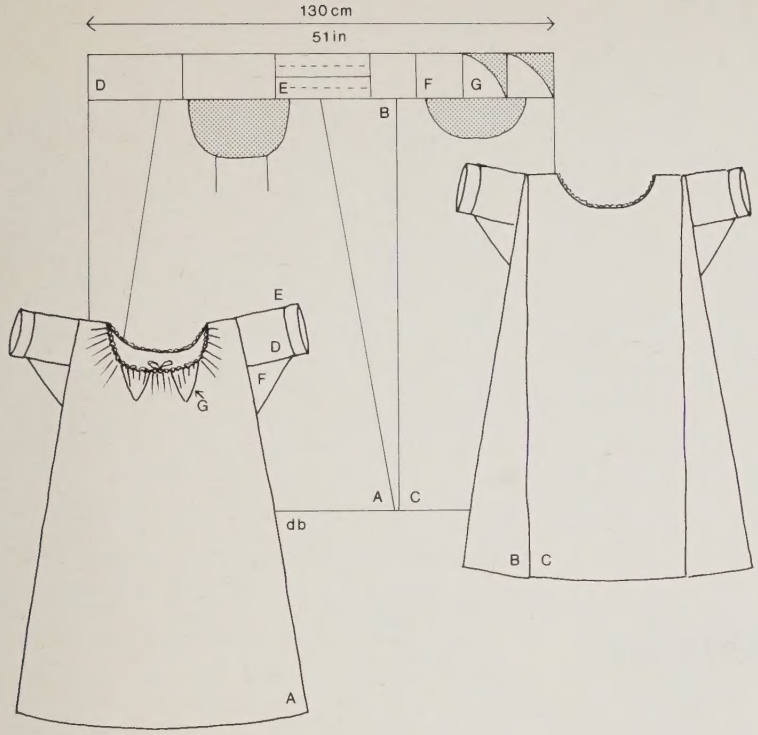
the garment depends entirely on the decorative permanent gathering at the neck and wrists.

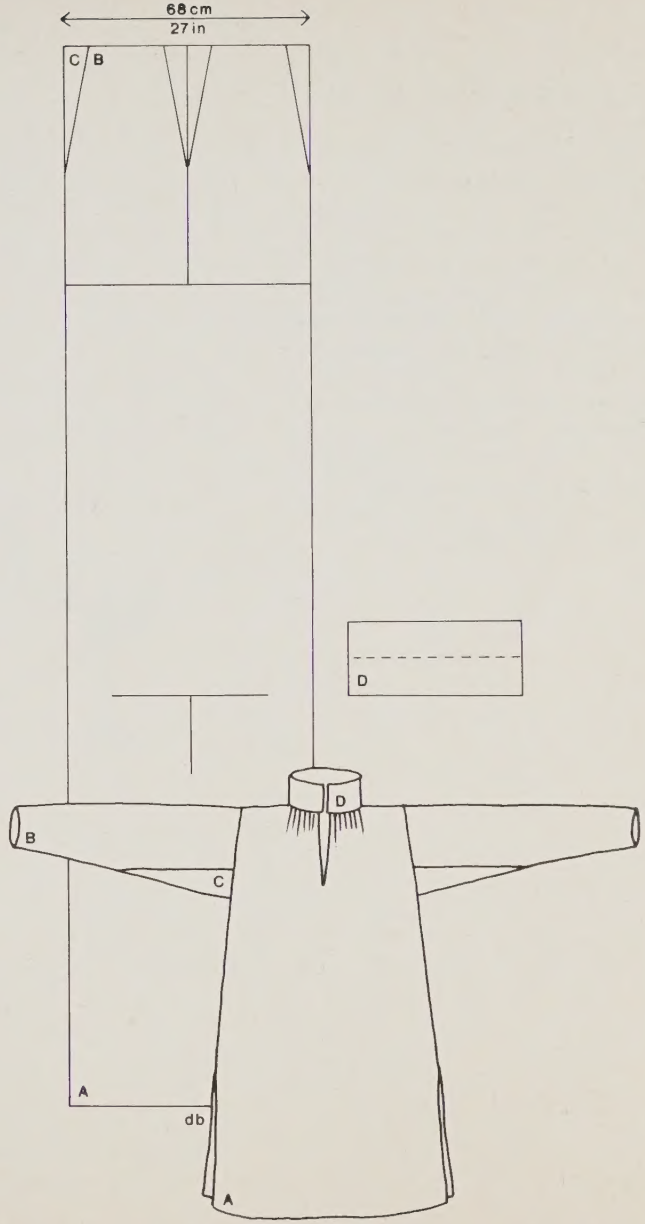
A much more everyday woman's undergarment from the 18th century (Diag. 6, ROM 972.430.2) is cut from a single length, with slanting pieces taken off at the shoulder and added to either side to extend the width of the skirt. Unlike the earlier example, the only part of this garment intended to show would be the straight neck frill of finer material. During the 19th century wider linen was often used for chemises (Diag. 7, ROM 951.156.2). In order to utilize the material to the fullest advantage the garment has been cut as shown, reversing right side up and upside down so that the flare is quite adequately comfortable. Triangular gussets are set in at the front of the neck to accommodate the fashionable bust of the period. There are many charming versions of chemises with ingenious simple cuts, suited to the available widths of material and reminiscent of many an earlier gown.

In 16th-century portraits both men and women are shown wearing shirts with either low necks or high ones with a stand-up collar. A man's plain high-necked shirt (The People's Museum of Zadar, Yugoslavia), probably Italian, survived in the wreckage of a ship which went down on the Yugoslavian coast not long after 1582. It was seen briefly; with a sketch made at that time and published measurements the cut is reconstructed (Diag. 8). As in many European garments there is no shoulder seam. The neck has been formed by a single T-shaped cut with the extra width gathered in at front and back of a straight stand-up collar. The sleeves are each a half-width cut in a slope from elbow to wrist, and these pieces are added



6. Woman's chemise. American. 18th century.
White linen with finer linen neck frill.
Gift of the Fashion Group Inc. of Toronto.
ROM 972.430.2



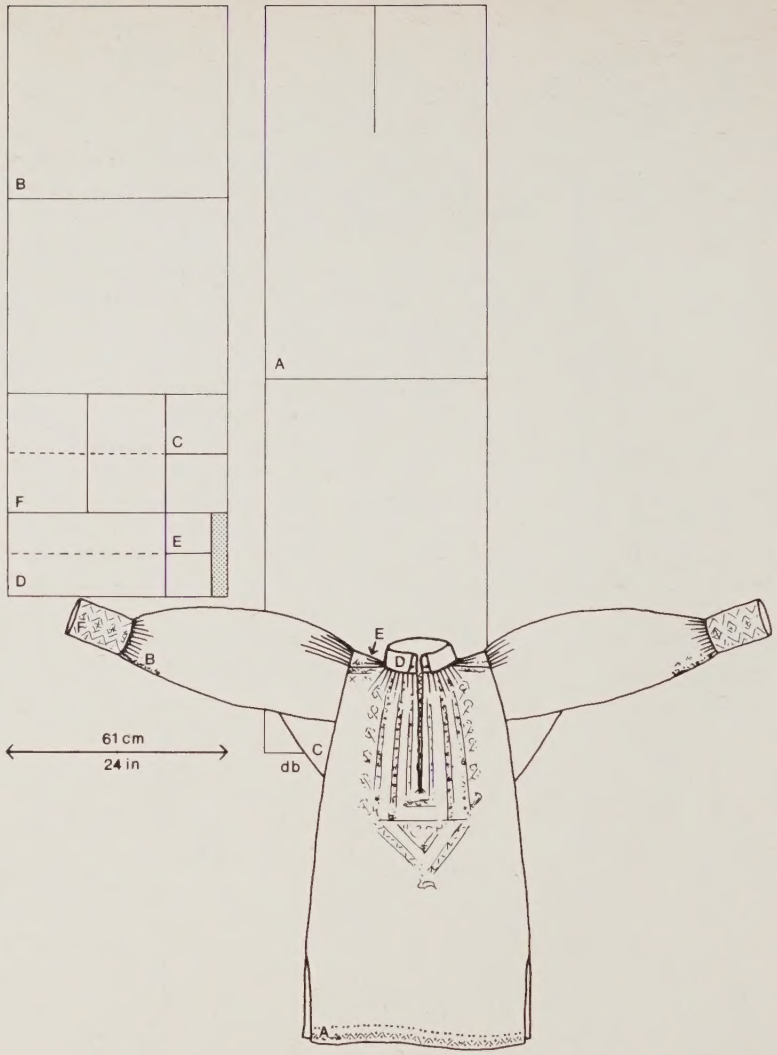


7. Woman's chemise. English. Dated 1831.
Fine white linen with narrow lace edging.
Gift of Mrs. R. A. Fairbairn. ROM 951.156.2

8. Man's shirt. Probably Italian. Late 16th century.
Plain white linen.
The People's Museum of Zadar, Yugoslavia.

to widen the top of the sleeves. Side vents are left at the bottom for better movement.

In a Spanish shirt of the 18th century (Diag. 9, ROM 970.137.2) the neck has been made to fit somewhat better by cutting front and back separately and inserting a small square to make the shoulder. This piece and the back and front are all gathered into the collar. English men's shirts of the early 19th century are remarkably similar. One (Diag. 10, ROM 910.138.4) has small triangular gussets inserted at the ends of the cross cut for the neck. This eases the collar and strengthens the construction considerably. This is quite an ordinary shirt, but another of fine linen owned by the same man has much fuller sleeves, an ornamental strengthening band across the shoulders, and a frill down the front opening, making quite a special garment.

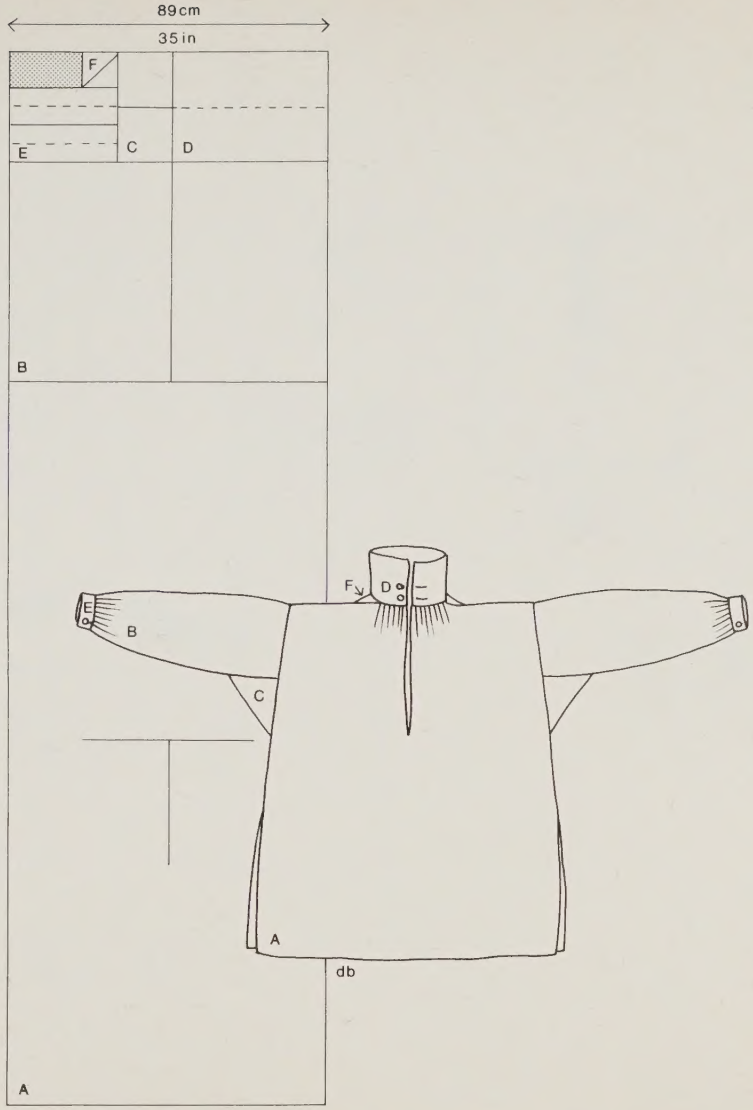


9. Man's shirt. Spanish, Province of Toledo. Late 18th—early 19th century.
White linen embroidered with white linen.
ROM 970.137.2

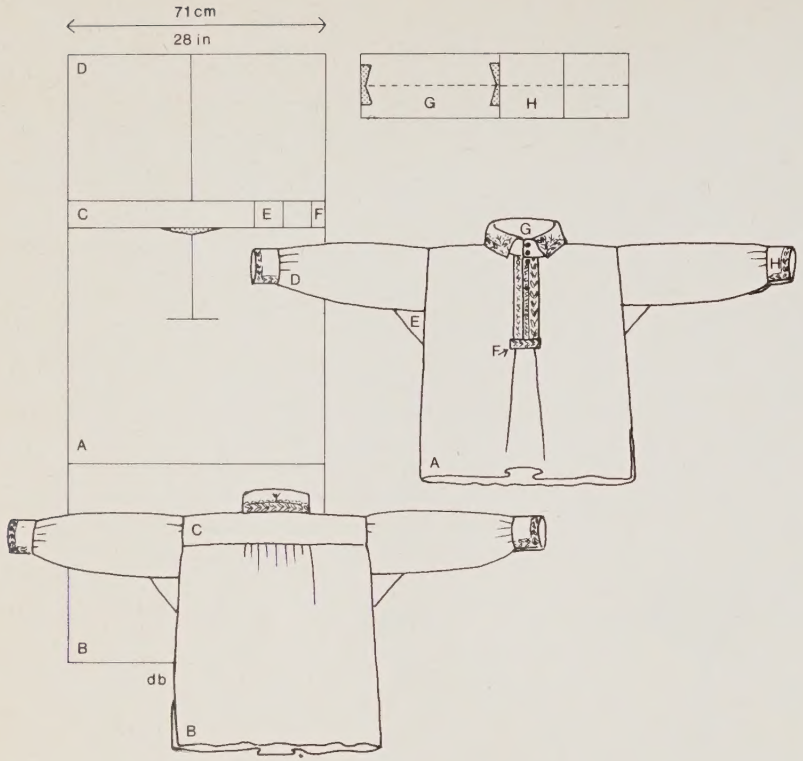
A further step in the development of the shirt is illustrated by a comparatively recent but still traditional Spanish type from South America (Diag. 11, ROM 971.202). Fullness gathered right into the neck at the back of the collar is not the most becoming thing, as it is apt to make the man look round-shouldered. The addition of a back yoke makes a smooth fit across the shoulders with the fullness placed lower where it is needed. This shirt has another treatment of fullness for the front. The neck opening is slashed across at the bottom, and the flaps thus formed are folded under to make a buttoned front opening. Below this the fullness is held in a box pleat.

A survival of an early type of work shirt is the smock-frock which was worn by farmers and other country people during the 18th and 19th centuries in England. The ROM is fortunate in having a number of these now rare garments. All are of plain linen of widths around 90 cm (36″). A simple but characteristic one (Diag. 12, ROM 971.287.6) is shown cut with no shoulder seam and all the pieces in the form of rectangles. A band applied over the shoulder for strength makes it appear to have a yoke. This garment is fully reversible with a buttoned neck opening both front and back. The fit is due to ornamental gathering at the neck and on the sleeves, which became more elaborate as the 19th century wore on.

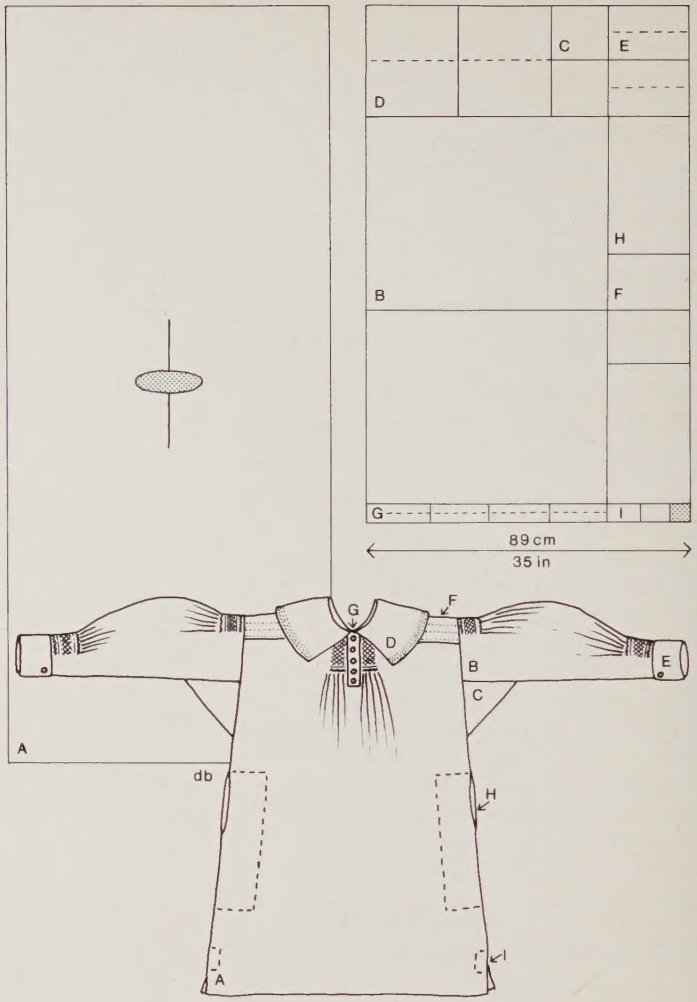
A rich area for research on traditional ways of doing things is the Christian Church, and the making



10. Man's shirt. English. Early 19th century. White cotton. Part of the wardrobe of Thomas Coutts (died 1822), founder of Coutts Bank. Gift of Mr. Francis Coutts. ROM 910.138.4



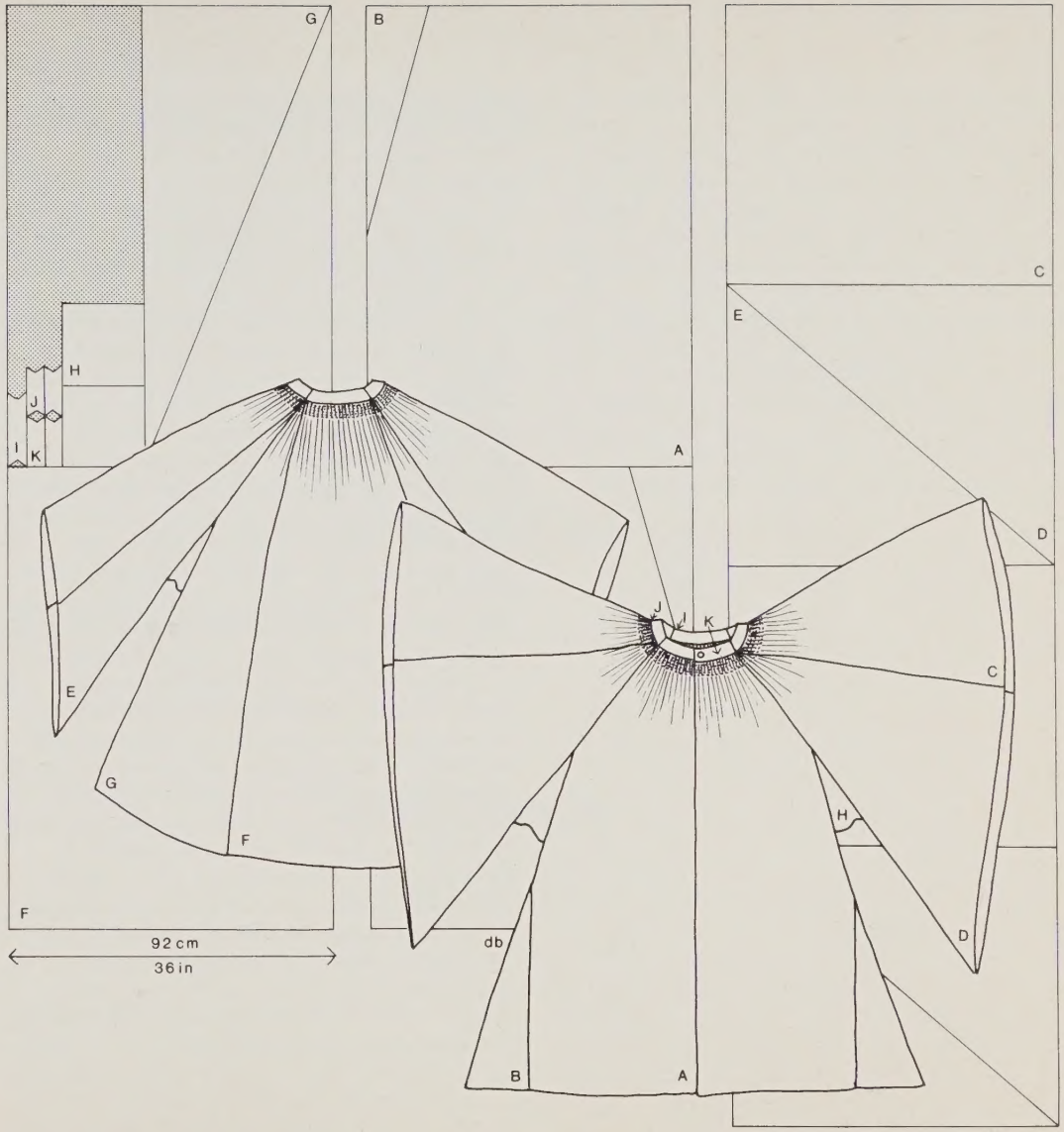
11. Man's shirt. South American, possibly Chile. About 1930. Commercial white cotton with fine embroidery done with a sewing machine. Gift of the Toronto Diocesan Anglican Church Women. ROM 971.166.202 a



12. Man's smock. English, probably Sussex. 1860-1880. Heavy black linen smocked with white cotton. ROM 971.287.6

of the vestments is no exception. All of these were originally everyday garments and only through time and tradition have been set aside for special use. The cope was originally a rain coat, the chasuble a cloak, the alb was simply the white tunic or shirt of everyday Roman wear, and the surplice a garment that was put on over the mediaeval fur robe. In albs and surplices we find an elaboration of the same ideas of straight cutting that we have been examining in the shirts, but usually with a much more lavish use of material. One example (Diag. 13, ROM 944.38) is an exquisitely sewn surplice of the finest linen. The sleeve is particularly interesting, designed to be most effective when the arms are raised.

Although it is hard to generalize about loom widths in Europe, it is safe to say that once the warp-weighted loom had been superseded, and except for special productions, the European width was based on the reach of a weaver sitting at a horizontal loom throwing the shuttle with one hand and catching it with the other. Depending on the skill of the weaver this could be up to about 130 cm (approx. 50"), but was usually much less. The ell was about 95 cm (37.5" or very close to our yard) and many materials were woven one ell wide. This is a normal width and great enough for the characteristic western European cut to be as we have found it, based on a single width of material with slight additions or extensions to make the skirts a little wider.

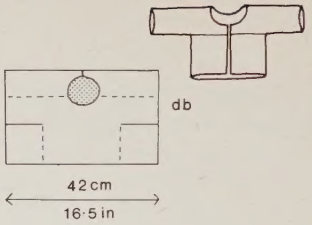


13. Surplice. English. About 1865. Very fine white linen exquisitely sewn and gathered around the neck.
Gift of Miss R. A. Roundthwaite. ROM 944.38

A Memory of Skin Garments?

In western Europe and in other areas of the world there is a sparse and scattered use of cloth cut horizontally rather than in the normal vertical manner. In some cases it is just done as a convenience: the width happens to be right for the desired garment used in this way. Often the direction of cut is due to a desire to have the selvage form the lower edge of the garment, as in some short blouses and jackets and in the abbas, the great loose top garment of the Near East. However, the horizontal rather than the vertical approach to covering the body may sometimes be the survival of an ancient idea. Wrapping around the body is an idea basic to the cutting of garments from skins in many parts of the world. A large skin will fold around with no side seams, and inserting of sleeves into vertical side slashes and joining the shoulders completes the garment. There is not enough evidence to come to any firm conclusions, but the possibility that the horizontal use of material may be a skin concept is worth bearing in mind.

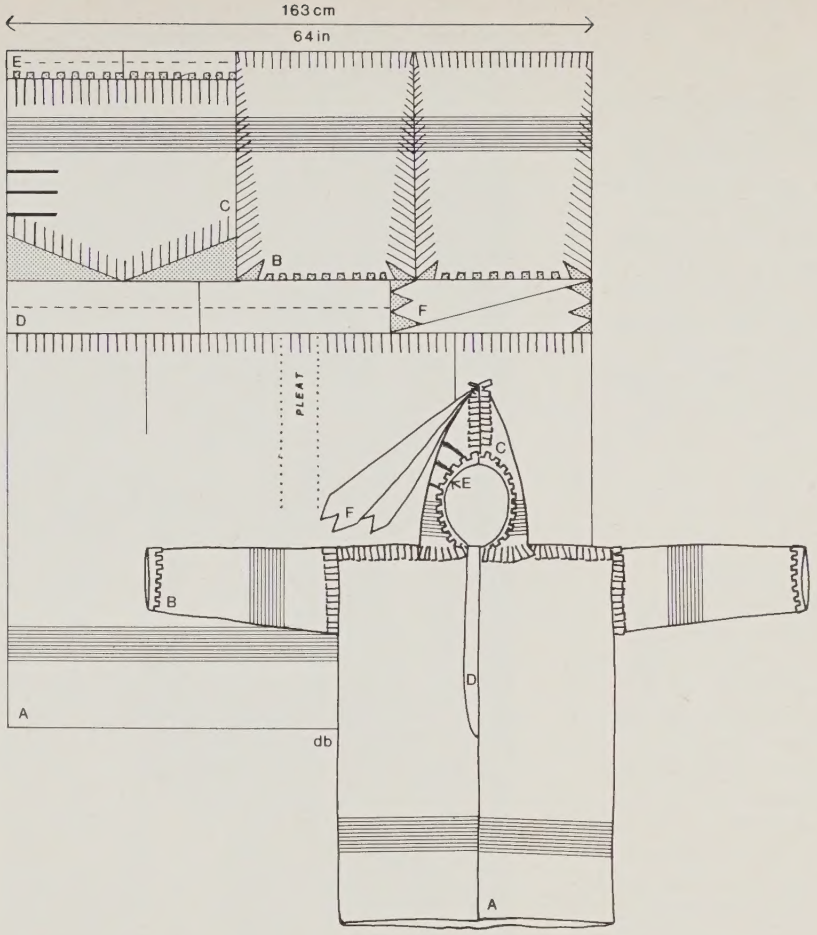
We find the horizontal cut in many baby clothes of the 18th and 19th centuries. The simple form could be trimmed with frilling and held in place by the binders that were standard baby wear. One strange baby shirt deserves more comment (Diag. 14, ROM 950.63.5). A width of cloth has the top folded down to make the sleeves, which are separated from the body with horizontal slashes. The flaps below these sleeve slashes are folded around to make the front of the shirt, and a seam holds them to the lower edge of the sleeves. This could be thought a freak, but it is the same cut as some of the earliest garments known from Europe. Among Danish Bronze Age finds there are short cloth jackets, rougher but otherwise of the same form. Margrethe Hald, the great Danish expert, has shown quite conclusively that the strange cut fits exactly with the fore part of a deer skin. She considers the jackets to be a hang-over in cloth of an earlier skin garment. It is fascinating to think that in this baby shirt we have a survival hanging over right into the 19th century. A particularly interesting use of this strange cut is in a top garment called a *guba*, known in eastern Hungary and Transylvania from at least as far back as the late 17th century. These coats were made from a woollen blanket which has had flocks of wool twisted in as the weaving progresses. The effect is of a great woolly sheepskin coat.



14. Infant's shirt. Canadian, Newmarket, Ontario. About 1812. White cotton, worn by Hannah Doane. Gift of Mrs. T. S. Jardine and Miss Helena Daly
ROM 950.63.5

The Capote

Mention should be made of a garment which played a considerable part in the history of our own country—the blanket coat or capote. These were worn by Indian, French and English alike for outdoor winter wear right up until the end of the 19th century, and in modified form are still with us. The old ones are now exceedingly rare. They were cut with care according to the dimensions of a single large Hudson's Bay Company blanket. These English wool blankets were, in the early days, one of the most popular items in the trade of the Hudson's Bay and North West companies. It is not known when the making of the coats began, but by the end of the 18th century they were common. People probably fashioned their own coats at first, but as time went on they became a standard item (Diag. 15, ROM 967.83.1). It is interesting to examine the pattern to see how the fringes were cut out as part of each basic piece. Fringe is commonly used on Indian clothing to help moisture drip off rather than soak into the garment.



15. Capote. Canadian. Late 19th century. Made from a Hudson's Bay blanket, originally white with a coloured band, dyed black. Worn by Dr. C. T. Currelly, first director of the Royal Museum of Archaeology, at Gilbert Plains, Manitoba, 1898-99 while serving as a missionary. Gift of Mr. Ralph T. Currelly ROM 967.83.1

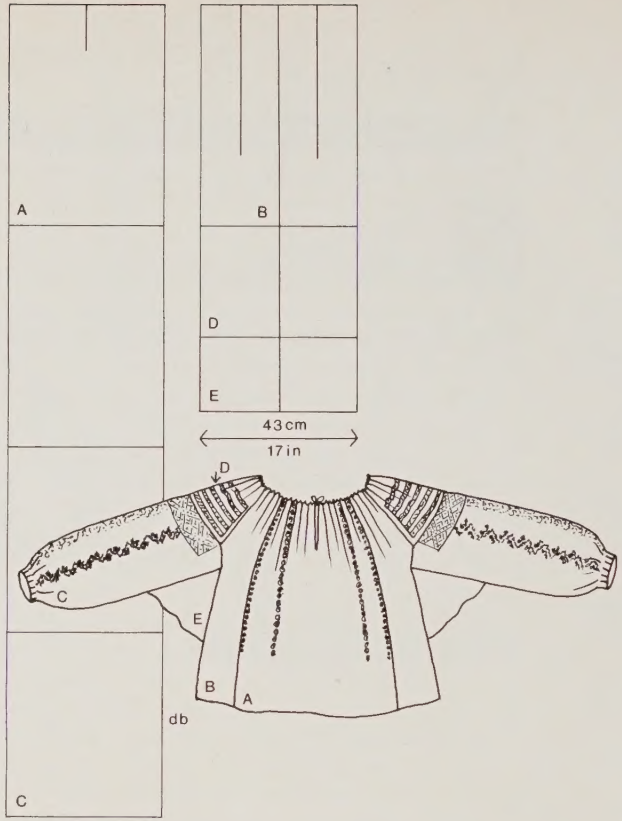
Eastern Europe and Western Asia

In this area there is an even greater dearth of early material than in western Europe, but the traditional cuts based on the widths of locally made hand-woven materials have remained in use almost to the present day. Although the same principles apply to all garments, the basic body covering, in this geographical area the shirt, provides the best source for comparison. There are three distinct shirt cuts with many variations.

Loom widths were and are narrow, around 45 cm (18″). Consequently, considerable additions must be made to the basic width of the cloth before a garment can encircle the body comfortably.

Shirts Gathered into the Neck

A woman's embroidered shirt from North Moldavia (Diag. 16, ROM 941.22.135) is an excellent classic cut of a basic type common all over Roumania and in parts of the Ukraine. The body consists of three widths of material, one each for front and back, and the third split and put in at the sides. The sides are slashed for the insertion of the sleeves, which are each a full width and have underarm gussets. Originally, this cut probably had the sleeve pieces running right up to the neck, as in some earlier Roumanian examples, but the standard cut in more recent shirts is as shown, with a separate narrower piece for the shoulder. As these blouses are heavily



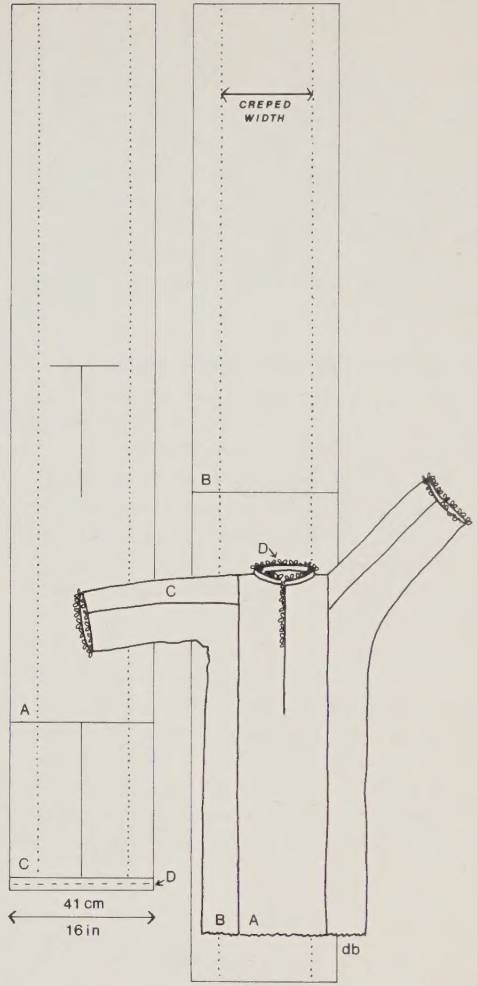
16. Woman's shirt. Roumanian, north Moldavia. Late 19th century. White cotton with polychrome cotton embroidery and beaded details.
Gift of Miss Amice Calverley ROM 941.22.135

embroidered it is probably better to have less fullness to gather into the neck, and the additional width of the sleeve comes where it is needed, at the bend of the shoulder. Sometimes the shirts are a full-robe length (Pl. 5, ROM 941.22.36) but usually the skirt is made of coarse material as it often was covered by a heavier woollen skirt. It seems likely that this cut is a survival of the undergarments worn by fashionable people of the Renaissance and early Baroque periods. These shirts, as we have already seen, were in their turn survivals of mediaeval garments.

Shirts with Sleeve and Side Pieces in One

A strange cut, dependent for its success on the particular kind of material used, is worth noting. The wearing of shirts made in this way was fairly widespread in Turkey, Greece and the Aegean Islands. The making was centred on Istamboul and some Greek towns. The material is a heavily creped weave of silk, cotton or a mixture of the two. The actual width of the one shown (Diag. 17, ROM 965.30.1) is 41 cm (16") but it pulls in to about 25 cm (10"). The side width is carried right along the sleeve to the wrist and a half-width

Plate 5. Woman's costume. Roumanian, North Moldavia. Late 19th century. White linen and cotton shirt with polychrome cotton embroidery worn with a wrap-around skirt of black wool and a patterned head kerchief of cotton and hemp. Gift of Miss Amice Calverley. ROM 941.22.117 .61 .36



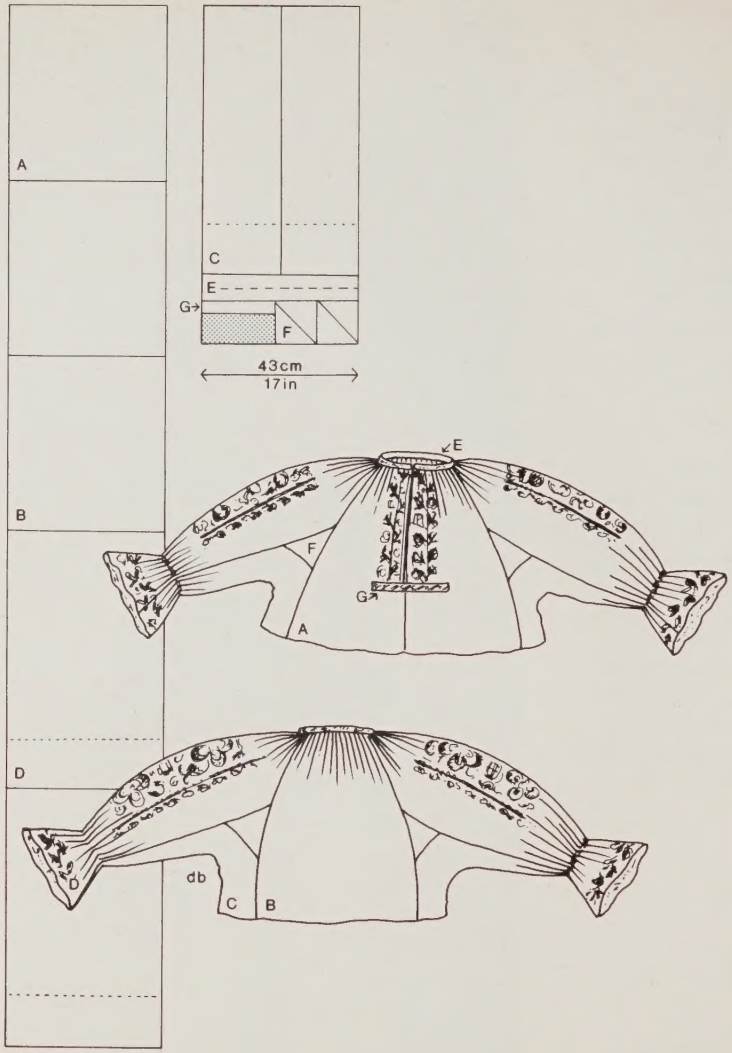
17. Woman's shirt. Greek. Northern Epirus, now Albania. Mid 19th century. Cream silk and cotton crepe edged with silk needle lace.
Gift of Mrs. Elektra Megaw ROM 967.30.1

inserted to complete the top of the sleeve. The same idea of the side piece running on into the sleeve occurs in some women's blouses from Roumania (Banat and Transylvania). The material is not elastic but heavy cotton, and the form is achieved by the insertion of triangular gussets at the point where the body, the side piece and the upper part of the sleeve come together (Diag. 18, ROM 941.22.45).

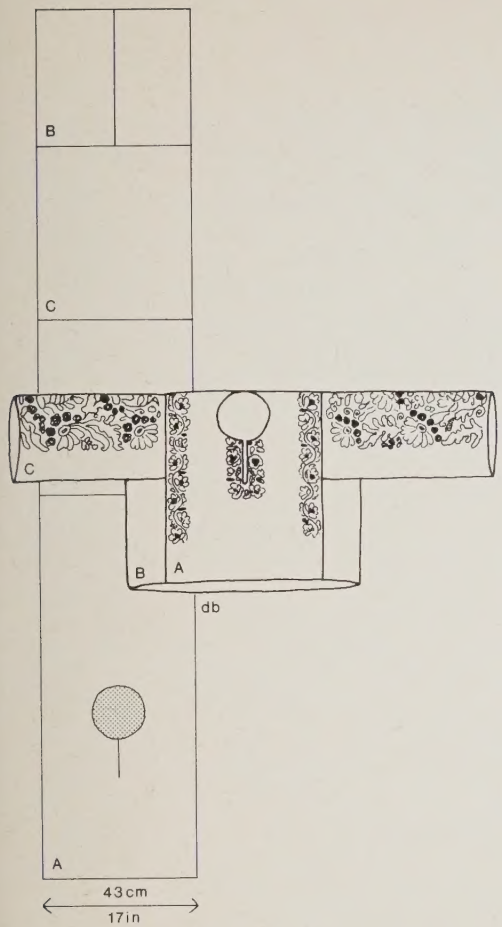
Shirts with Additional Width Below the Sleeve

A Ukrainian woman's shirt (Diag. 19, ROM 941.22.91) gives the basic form of the third, and by far the most important, cut from this area. A single width without shoulder seam makes up the body of the garment, and the sleeves are attached to it. The width of the garment is increased by an addition at the sides below the sleeves. In this case a half-width has been added at either side making a fairly slim garment, but more often a full width is used.

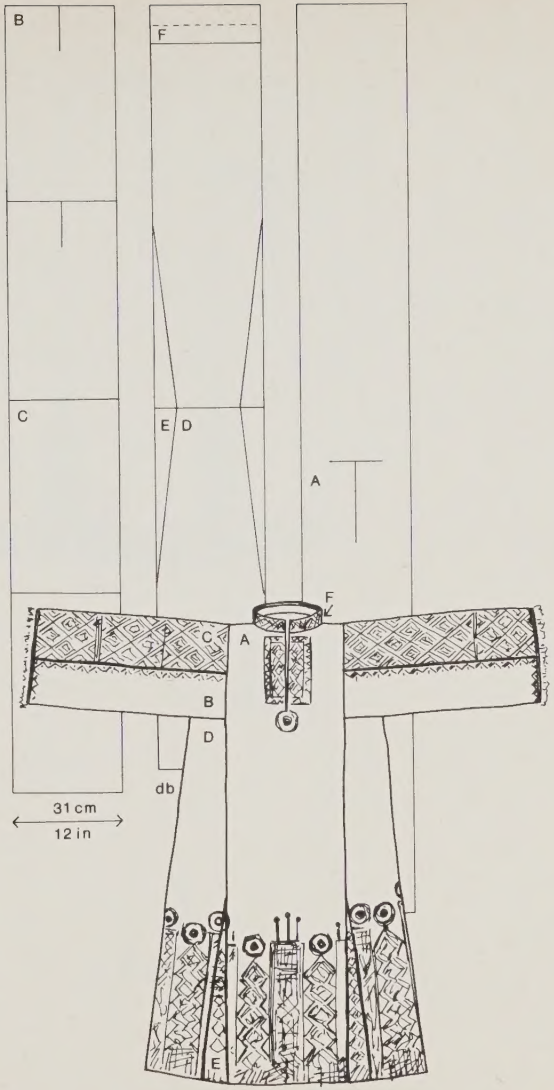
This cut is enormously widespread, extending throughout the area of Turkish influence. In our collections we have examples of wide provenance and many variations, only a few of which can be shown. An example from Macedonia (Diag. 20, ROM 941.22.54) is of quite narrow material, only 31 cm (about 12″). It has the width of the skirt



18. Woman's shirt. Roumanian, Banat. Early 20th century. White cotton with polychrome cotton embroidery.
Gift of Miss Amice Calverley ROM 941.22.45

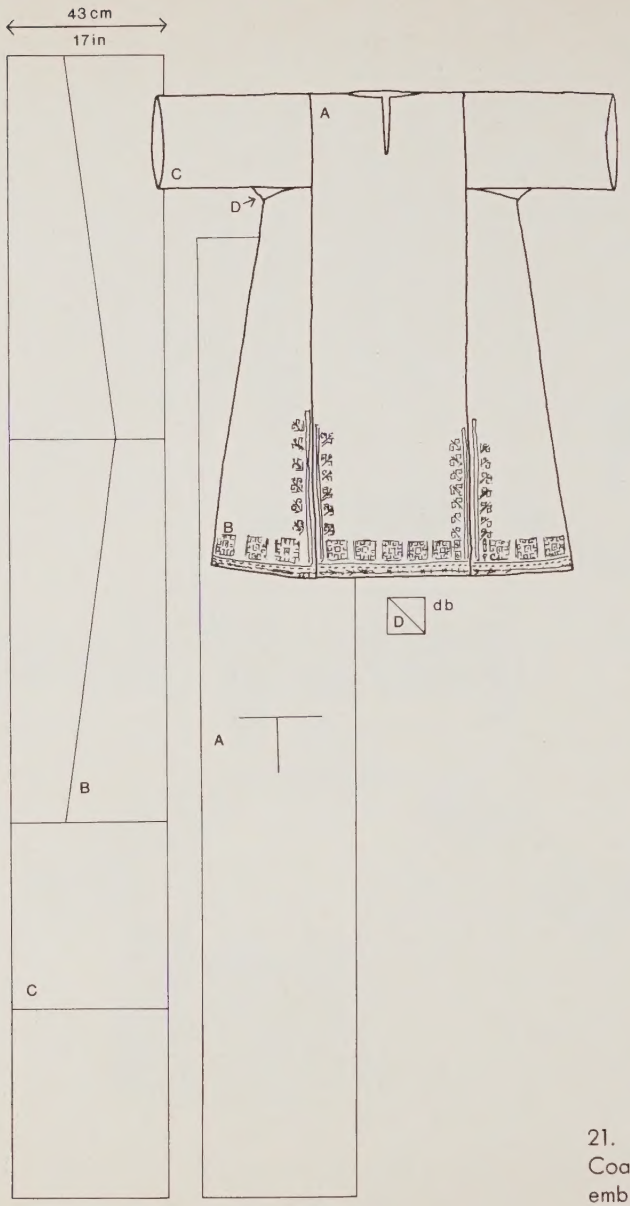


19. Woman's shirt. Ukrainian, Bucovina, Hotin. Early 20th century. White cotton with heavy cotton embroidery mainly in yellow.
Gift of Miss Amice Calverley ROM 941.22.91



20. Woman's shirt. Macedonian, Vlach, Skopje. 19th century. Heavy white cotton with black wool embroidery.
Gift of Miss Amice Calverley ROM 941.22.54

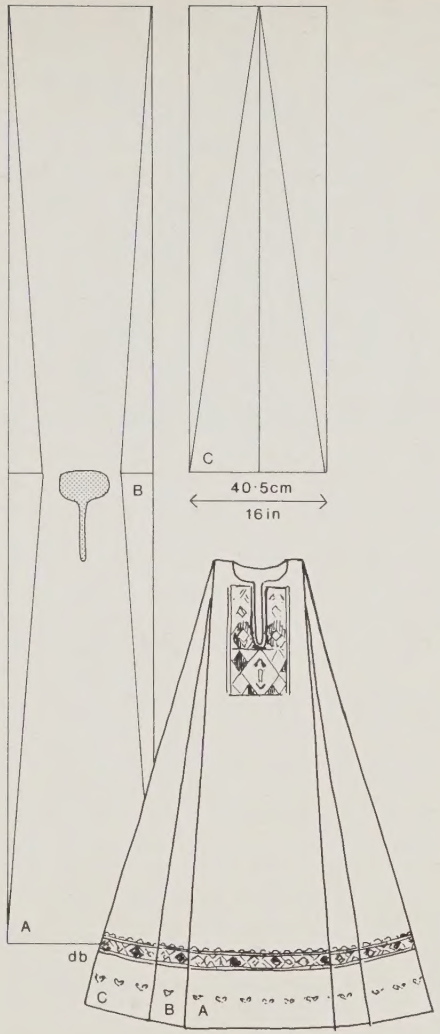
extended by taking small slices from either side under the arm and adding them at the bottom. The sleeves also are made fuller by using two widths. Often, when more than one width is used in a sleeve, the seams are set at front and back, as here. From Palestine (Diag. 21, ROM 946.7.20) a simple version illustrates a method of adding fullness to the garment which is met with over and over again. An extra length is slashed obliquely from end to end. Sometimes this is done from corner to corner, but more often as shown here. One of these pieces is reversed before seaming the two together to make a side addition with a very satisfactory flare.



21. Woman's shirt. Palestinian. Mid 19th century. Coarse natural cotton with coloured silk embroidery.
Gift of the Estate of Holman Hunt ROM 946.7.20

There are many ways of slicing these narrow lengths of material and reversing the pieces so as to create fullness. A Greek woman's sleeveless dress from northern Epirus, made about 100 years ago (Diag. 22, ROM 969.3.1), comes from only three widths of narrow material and yet has a beautiful, easy, graceful sweep.

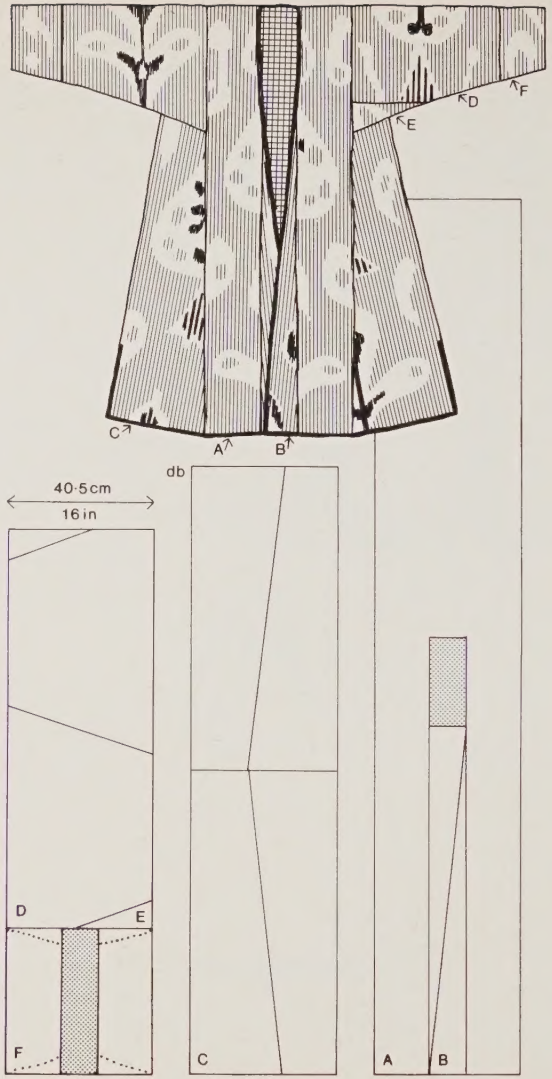
The basic cut carries over into garments other than shirts. It is the cut of the szür mantles of the Hungarian plains (cover design, cover diagram ROM 972.248.1), and occurs in many related



22. Woman's sleeveless dress. Greek, Northern Epirus, now Albania. Mid 19th century. Black wool embroidered with coloured silks. ROM 969.3.1

garments in the Balkans, Asia Minor, the Eurasian steppes, and western and central Asia.

A coat of warp ikat silk of the late 19th century (Diag. 23, ROM 972.118.9) from Turkestan illustrates several of these points and a further extension of the same idea. A section taken out of the centre of the body for the neck has been cut obliquely from end to end, and the two resultant pieces added to the front of the coat to make flaps that will overlap. Larger flaps are often added in this way, being cut from an extra length of material. Considerable ingenuity has been shown in the cutting of the sleeves, which go across the material and are carefully interlocked with a piecing at one side of each. This is an economy frequently practised. The side additions have been cut in a normal way.



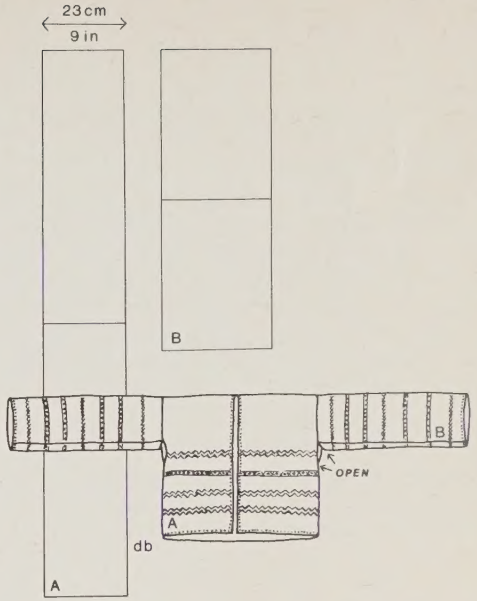
23. Man's coat. Afghanistan, Turkmen tribes. Late 19th century. Silk with warp ikat designs in green and red on a natural ground. ROM 972.118.9

Coats of the Far East

The vast reaches of the Far East may be divided roughly into three regions. In the southerly parts, including the Indian subcontinent and the southern archipelagos, clothing is based on the draping of loom widths with minimal or no sewing. The second region, including Japan, Korea and the Ryukyus, Taiwan, parts of southern China, Southeast Asia and the regions to the north of the Himalayas, has a clothing tradition based on woven cloth and garments fitted neatly into the available widths without wastage. As one moves to northern China, Mongolia and Manchuria, there is a constant reminder of non-cloth traditions reflected in the shape of garments based on skin, the original clothing material of the circumpolar regions. This seems extraordinary in light of the fact that cloth has been available and used throughout greater China for centuries. The garment pieces do not come economically out of the loom widths that are used, and would probably not cut to any better advantage from any other width of cloth.

Few old garments remain in China to provide a basis for research, but rich secondary material, including stamped tomb tiles and ceramic tomb figurines, provide a very fair picture of ancient Chinese costume. We also have some knowledge of loom widths: Han Dynasty (206 BC - 220 A.D.) about 50 cm (20"), T'ang Dynasty (608-906 A.D.) about 60 cm (24") and, in material from a Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 A.D.) costume in our own collection (ROM 956.67.2), 68 cm (27"). The early width was definitely too narrow for a body to be covered by one length, and so two were put together by a seam down the centre of the body. When putting two widths together, it is natural to seam them at the back and sides and to leave them open in the front, so that the garment could be put on easily and then wrapped around the body. The body garment of the Far East is a coat, not a shirt. Possibly the fact that it did not have to be pulled over the head had an influence in the development of the complex coiffures that are characteristic of the area.

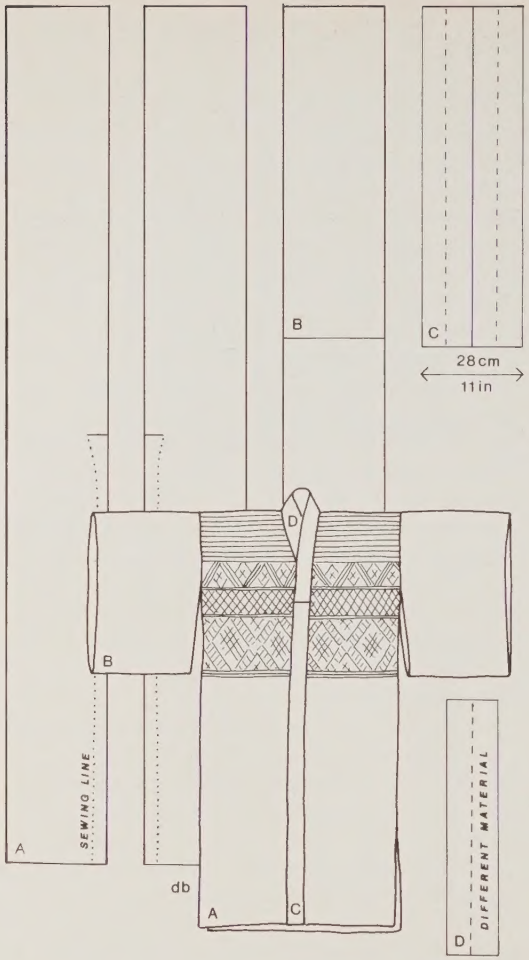
We see this coat garment in its simplest form in a short jacket from Taiwan (Diag. 24, ROM 915.3.31). The cloth was woven on the native loom which was capable only of weaving short lengths of fairly narrow material. It was set up twice to produce one length for the body and a slightly wider one for the sleeves. There is no allowance made for the width of the neck, and the only concession to bodily movement is that the seam has been left open for a short distance at the underarm to relieve strain. With refinement,



24. Coat. Taiwan, Atayal tribes. Last quarter of the 19th century. Natural white cotton with blue and red wool patterning. Collected by the Rev. George Leslie MacKay.
Knox College Collection ROM 915.3.31

this basic form became both the robe that is worn by many ancient Chinese and the kimono of ancient and modern Japan.

A kimono from Honshu (Diag. 25, ROM 964.150.1) shows a very simple form. It has a horizontal cut at the shoulder which makes it possible to fold a bit back at either side, making a comfortable neck opening. This is then finished by binding the coat front with a wide straight fold of material. The sleeves are deep and comfortable, and the seams where they join the body are left open for a short distance so that a belt will fit firmly just under the arms. The sleeves extend below this, and in more elaborate kimonos may extend almost to the floor (Pl. 6, ROM 943.30.4). The classic kimono form has the addition of extra

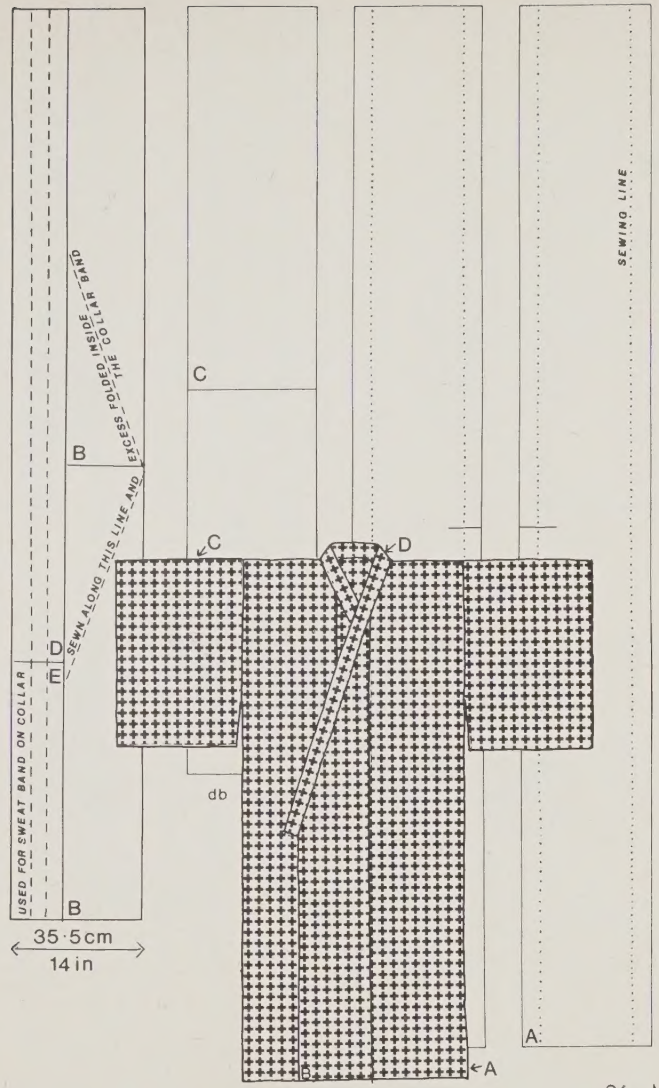


25. Coat. Japanese, northern Honshu. Late 18th—early 19th century. Indigo blue hemp with medium blue embroidery.
Gift of Mrs. Edgar J. Stone ROM 964.150.1

Plate 6. Woman's coat. Japanese. Early 20th century. White silk damask with polychrome silk and gold embroidery and stencilled patterning.
Gift of Mrs. Agar Adamson. ROM 943.30.4

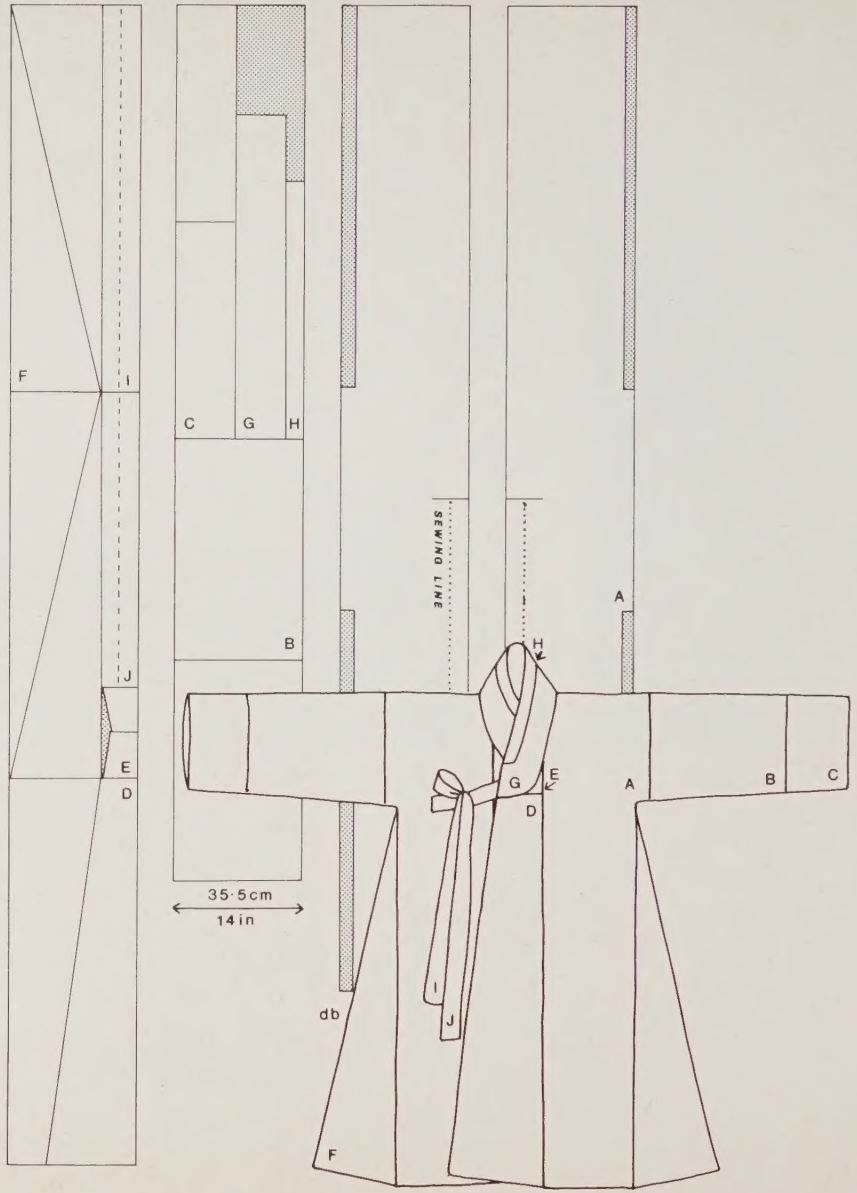
material on each side of the front opening (Diag. 26, ROM 971.166.42). This is a fairly modern Japanese example, but could almost as well serve as a diagram for a T'ang Chinese coat, except that the Chinese examples often had an addition of a full rather than a half-width of material to provide a front overlap. If the full width was not required for the body of the garment, as here, the extra material was put into the seam without cutting.

The kimono form was a natural one to lead to elaboration. We find a most effective treatment



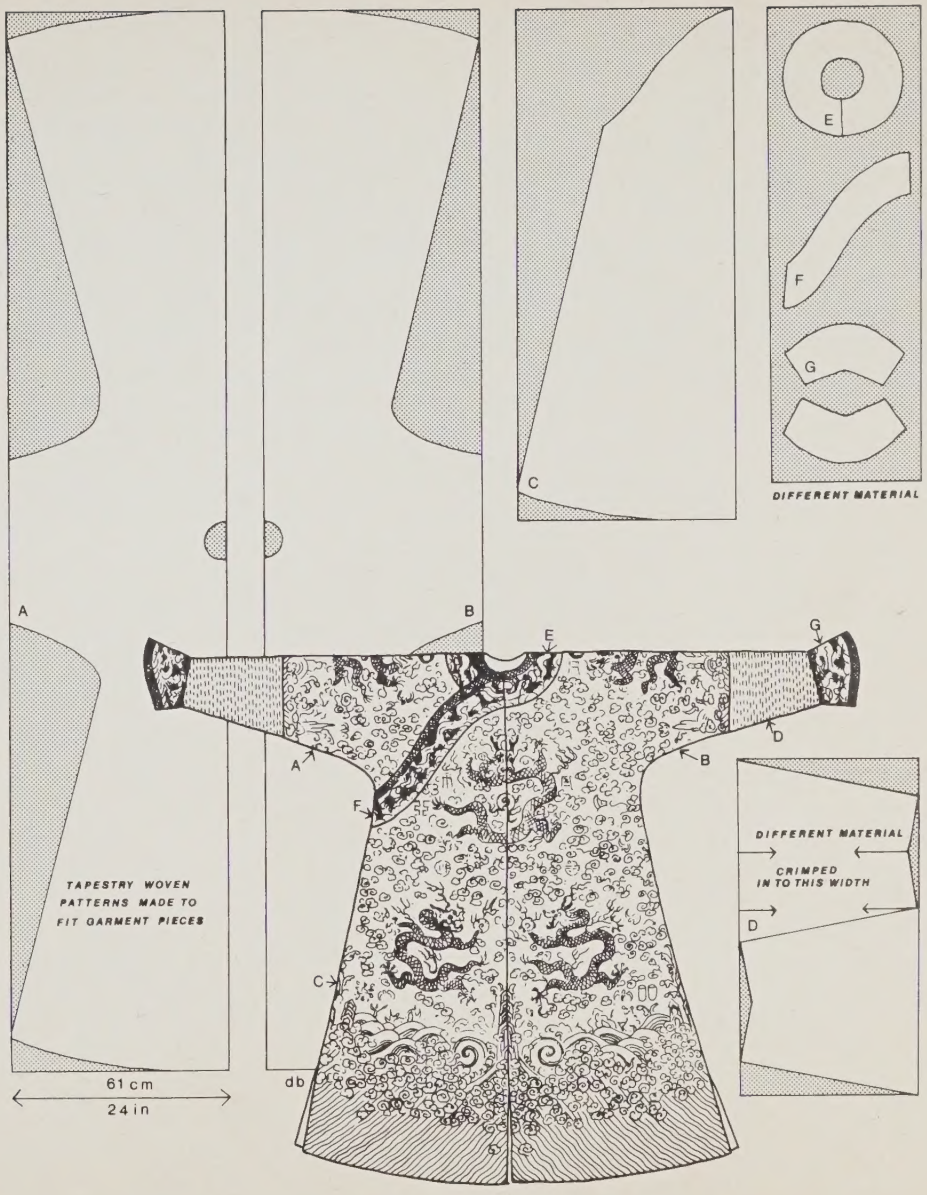
26. Man's coat. Japanese. Early 20th century.
Indigo blue cotton with warp and weft ikat pattern reserved in white.
Gift of the Toronto Diocesan
Anglican Church Women ROM 971.166.42

in a man's overcoat from Korea (Diag. 27, ROM 971.408.2). It is still essentially the same garment, but with the addition of front flaps and of side extensions it becomes something rather impressive. Interesting as this is in itself, it is important as in this garment we have a hang-over of a more archaic form of clothing, and it gives a very close idea of the cut of the robe of a dignitary of the Ming period (1368-1644 A.D.). At this time the Chinese dominated Korea, and clothing seems to have been based on China's ancient cloth-cutting traditions.



27. Man's coat. Korean, Seoul. Early 20th century. Plain white silk. Collected by Dr. and Mrs. Norman Wallace in 1920.
Gift of Miss Phyllis Higinbotham ROM 971.408.2

In China's long, long history, control passed from Chinese to nomadic invader and back again several times. The clothes of the northern invaders seem to be less in the cloth tradition and closer to the ancient skin cuts. This is certainly the case with the official robes of the last Imperial Chinese dynasty (Ch'ing, 1644-1911 A.D.). The ruling class of that time were from Manchuria and they brought with them their native riding costume. The robes of which Diag. 28, ROM 971.20.1 is a beautiful and typical example will not cut economically from the length of cloth.



28. Man's coat. Chinese. Manchu, Chia-ching period, 1796-1821. Yellow silk tapestry with the twelve imperial symbols, five-clawed dragons, clouds and waves made for the Chia-ching emperor.
Gift of Mrs. Edgar J. Stone ROM 971.20.1

Conclusions

The widths of woven cloth are important in the shaping of garments made from them. There are certain widths of looms belonging to different cultures and these influence the clothing of those cultures. This is important to stage designers because if they are reproducing garments from the past they should use the proper widths of material or the clothes will not look right. It is important to students of costume history because it is impossible to study anything intelligently without a knowledge of its skeleton, and cloth widths are the bones of costume design. It is important to historians and ethnologists because by taking note of a change in costume cut they can detect a change in population or at least the domination of that population.

It is important in all sorts of concrete and nebulous ways. It is a link in our chain of knowledge that until now has been almost completely ignored. It is almost too simple a thought to be noticed, and yet it must be.

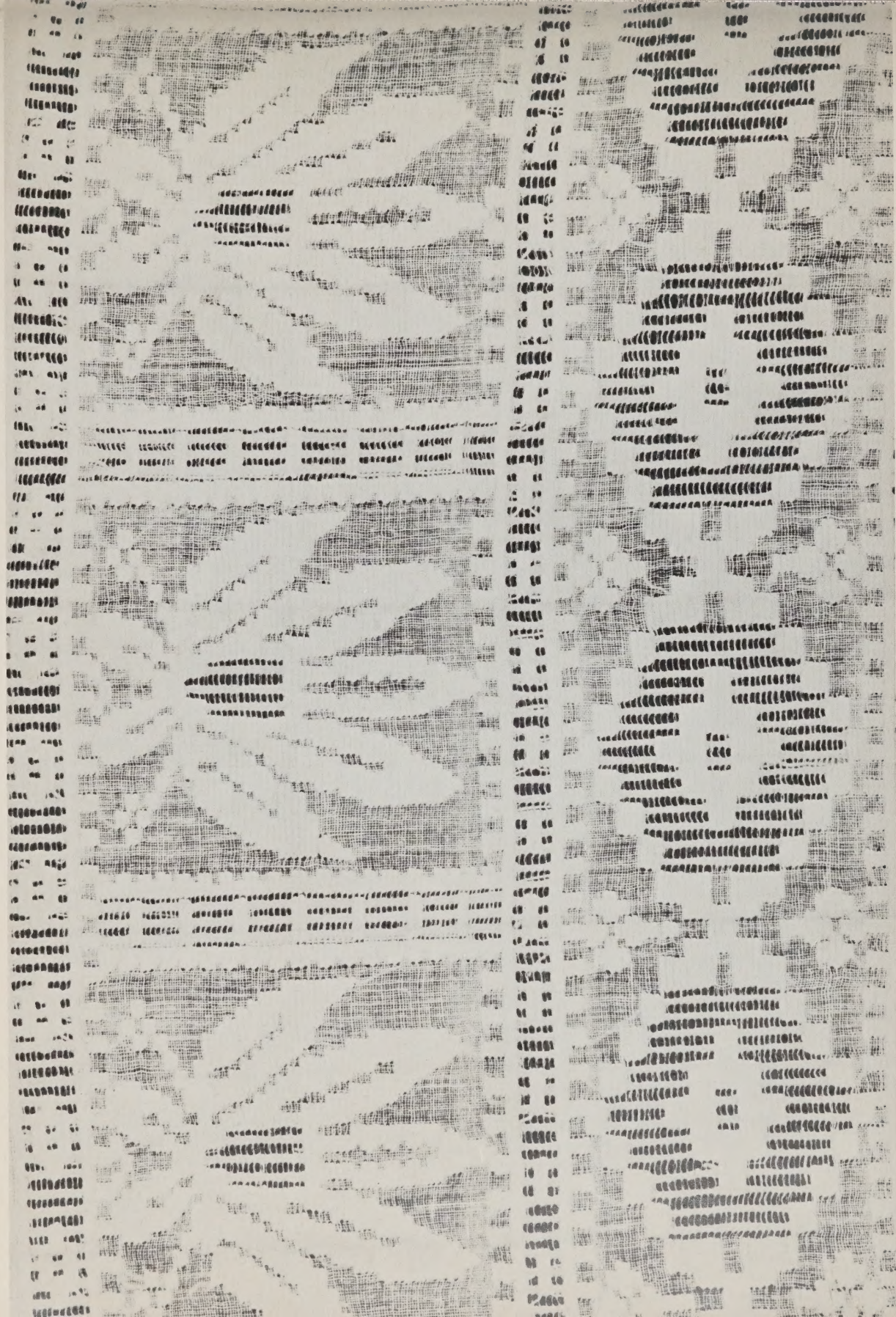
Work in the ROM Textile Department has opened up all sorts of exciting avenues, or at least thorny paths, for research. There are many aspects of the subject which could and should be covered in detail. One has already been accomplished with the publication, simultaneously with this booklet, of the monograph by Veronika Gervers-Molnar, *The Hungarian Szür: An Archaic Mantle of Eurasian Origin*. It is a study in depth of the fascinating and decorative coats of the Hungarian cattlemen, and how they relate to other garments in the area and derive from the most ancient times.

Dorothy K. Burnham
June 1973

Afterword

In 1941 Miss Amice Calverley gave to the Royal Ontario Museum her large and important collection of Roumanian costume. This sparked the original research done by the author of this booklet, then in charge of the ROM's textile department, and in time led to the theory of the relation of cut of garment to loom width of cloth presented here. Over the years this generous gift has also been an inspiration in the development of the collections, encouraging the gathering of comparative material from many parts of the world and resulting in the fascinating wide-ranging groups of simple costumes now in the ROM.

Harold B. Burnham
Curator, Textile Department,
April 1973



Detail from Pl. 2.

The diagrams are by the author, based on her original work and also on research done by two other members of the Textile Department, Veronika Gervers-Molnar and John Vollmer.

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Women's Costume in Early Ontario. Booklet no. 1 in the ROM's 5W series. By Katharine B. Brett.

Women's Costume in Ontario (1867-1907). Booklet no. 14 in the ROM's 5W series. By Katharine B. Brett.

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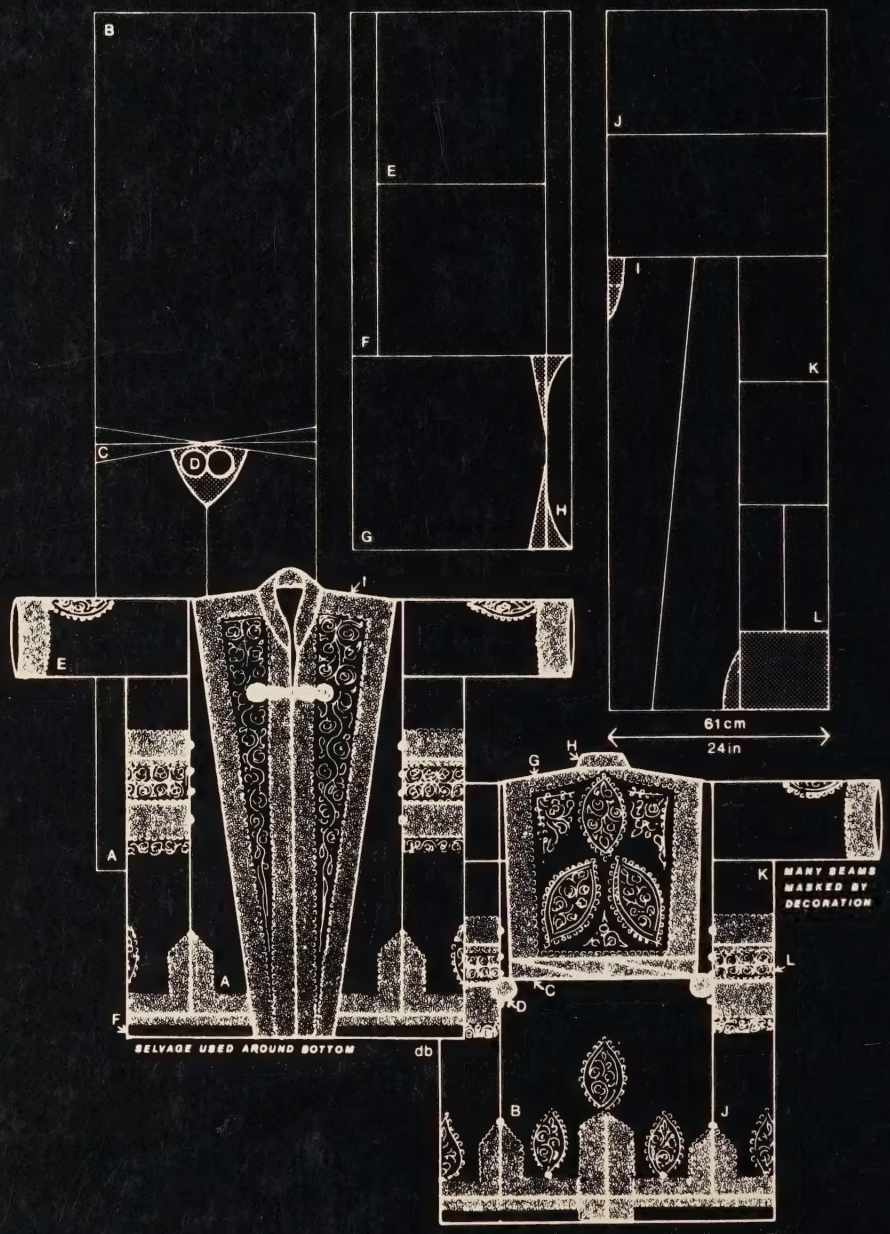

Cover. Cattleman's festive coat (szür). Hungarian, Transylvania. About 1890. White fulled wool with black broadcloth appliqué.
Gift of the Hungarian Helikon Society of Toronto.
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